



Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke

Ichibu Saki

Illustrated by Nemusuke

Character Designs by Ushio Shirotori

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Prologue

On a bright spring day, Claire stood before the imposing gates that partitioned off the grounds of the Royal Academy from the outside world as deep emotion overcame her. Several weeks had already passed since the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy's graduation gala and the disabling of Charlotte's white magic. She, Vik, and the rest of her friends had spent the remainder of their holidays visiting Lindel Island, and now Claire was progressing to the next grade as a third-year in the Royal Academy. *In my first life*, Claire mused, *this was when I started attending the Academy.*

Claire understood that she lived within a dating sim, but to her, having been Claire Martino since birth, the world around her was real. Therefore, although she had confided to Vik and her other friends that she'd chosen to redo her life for the sake of Noston's and Paffuto's futures, she never claimed that the world in which they lived was a so-called fictional world. Nor did she plan to now. However, this aspect of her life presented Claire with her current largest concern, namely—

The magic tornado which will come at the end of spring, she thought. In a few months, a magical tornado would form to wreak havoc across the land. In her first life, Claire had only just managed to successfully purify the tornado; she assumed that, having more familiarity with using magic and more magical power, purification would come much easier this time.

However, the real problem lay in the tornado's aftermath. In her first life, Claire had been so exhausted of magical power by the purification process that she was expelled from this world and thrust straight into another. Without fail, every time Claire exhausted her supply of magical power or took a great blow related to her magic, she vaulted the wall between worlds. Prior to this, she had always found either Riko playing her game or the game's saved data. Yet Claire could not predict where she might wind up this time. Perhaps she would be flung somewhere completely different. Or worse, perhaps, depending on the situation, circumstances would result such that she could not return from this

other world. The mere thought of such a fate made her shudder. *I've been quite lucky thus far*, she thought. *To ensure I can overcome this ordeal, I need to purify the tornado without running out of magic.*

Lost in thought, Claire had yet to step onto school grounds. Vik called to her, "Are you not coming in?"

"Oh, Vik."

Although Claire, as ever, lived in the apartments she'd been granted within the detached palace on the grounds of the palace proper, their arrangement was such that she and Vik took separate carriages to school. From the looks of it, today he had arrived just after her.

She smiled and returned his greeting with a hello before Vik continued. "Today we have our placement exams."

"Oh yes," she said. *That's right*, she added to herself. That reminded her of another worry more imminent than that of the magical tornado.

Today marked the customary exam given at the start of each new term. However, Claire had little and less to be concerned about with regard to her own scores. The object of her worry was the young man reading a textbook next to her.

"Dion," Claire said, "you mustn't study while you walk; it's dangerous. Couldn't you pick it back up once we're in the classroom?"

"Hmm. Give me just another minute or two," Dion said. "After all, they'll start the exam shortly after we get inside, won't they?"

"Yes, but even so." Claire paused. "I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"Oh, I can earn an average score, no problem," he said perfectly nonchalantly as he remained absorbed in the textbook. "But I have to get into the same class as you."

Claire didn't have an answer to that. She and Vik exchanged glances and shared a grin.

Dion was to return to the Academy this spring. After the Meads fell from power, Dion should have been expelled, but Vik had pulled strings to grant his

continued enrollment. This fantastic news had delighted Claire and her companions for mere moments before they recalled the gap in Dion's education, and thus they'd spent the spring holidays studying as a group. Classes at the Royal Academy of Paffuto were divided on the basis of merit as opposed to rank. Both Claire and Vik were top scholars, and as such Dion needed to score just as high in order to join them in the same class. Claire considered this quite the daunting task, but as she and Vik looked over at Dion reading his textbook, staring up at the sky as he turned something or other over in his mind, Vik grinned.

"Dion, I didn't ensure you could come back to school just so you could be Claire's guard. That was only my official stance, you know. You're free to enjoy another year of school as you please."

"My sincerest gratitude, Your Highness," said Dion. "But I'd like to score well for you too, after you've said such kind words to me. I wouldn't want it said I inconvenience my companions."

"Don't be so stubborn all of a sudden," said Vik. "It'd be one thing if I thought you were a serious sort of person through and through, but you're not. I've never cared what others think of your performance, you know."

"I've sworn fealty to both you and Claire, Your Highness. To wind up in a different class would break my vows."

Vik fell silent. Once again, he and Claire exchanged looks. If that was how far Dion wanted to push it, there really would be no stopping him now. *Dion can truly be serious about the oddest things*, Claire said to herself. She communicated this idea to Vik with her eyes alone so as not to disturb Dion's studying.

No one said hello to Claire, Vik, or Dion as they passed through the gates and stepped onto campus. The other students kept their distance and stole fleeting glances. Periodically, a squeal would arise only to be quickly suppressed with a hand over a mouth; such squealers were, Claire assumed, from this year's batch of new students. She thought it only natural they react in this manner, as they typically did not have opportunities to interact in person with Vik, member of the royal family that he was. *I recall before—when I enrolled here in my first life*

—*that Vik had quite the crowd around him*, Claire mused. At the time, she had noticed how he commanded the student body's respect and attention, which made her decide to keep her distance. She also remembered the many young noble ladies with presents for him, but none were to be seen now. For all were aware that Vik had a lady love already: Claire.

Incidentally, only a handful of hours after Claire had resolved to not become too involved with Vik, she'd inadvertently stuck her nose into a tiff between Nicola and another young noble girl. Vik had thus introduced her to the entire student body in the cafeteria as his dear friend, a memory that Claire rather wished she could forget. *Ah, but that uncomfortable tension and feeling of hopelessness does bring me back*, she thought.

"Dion's not the only one with his head in the clouds today, Claire," Vik remarked as he watched Claire lost in her reverie.

She hurried to compose herself. "I'm afraid I took a small trip down memory lane."

"Did you, indeed?" Vik asked. "Speaking of memories, I imagine I might have some good news for you before long."

"And what might that be?" She tilted her head, curious about such a suggestive statement.

Vik smiled as before but changed the subject. "Were you thinking about Miss Charlotte, by any chance? Don't worry. No doubt she's out there somewhere, unstoppable and bold as brass. Besides, she doesn't have dangerous magic any longer, and we are searching for her with the help of Noston. You have nothing to be concerned about anymore."

Claire took a moment to respond. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

Claire's younger sister, Charlotte, was still missing. They had searched for her high and low across Noston, but Charlotte was nowhere to be found. They'd even gone so far as to check the records of usage for the portal installed between Noston and Paffuto, but this turned up no sign of her. As Charlotte had practically no magic left to speak of, the portal was theoretically impossible to use, but this spoke to the level of scrupulous detail with which they conducted the search. However, for all their pains, they had yet to find her.

I do hope she isn't making a nuisance of herself to anyone, Claire thought. But I'm afraid I know better than that.

Claire sighed as she walked towards the school building, thoughts of the Martino family's rise from the ashes swirling through her mind.

Chapter 13

The results of her exams, as Claire discovered on her first day as a third-year student at the Royal Academy, were superb. She'd secured as fine marks as ever and joined her class with all its usual members.

Near the edge of the classroom, Dion, having successfully secured a spot in the top class as well, conversed cheerfully with Vik and his companions. Claire watched them with an internal sigh of relief, and she and Lydia readied their things to return home for the day.

"I see you're as brilliant as ever, Lady Claire," Lydia said.

"As are you, Lady Lydia," said Claire. "I'm delighted that we're to be in the same class again this year."

Lydia giggled. "You know, I've always been curious about this. You've been in Paffuto for all of a year, and yet your knowledge is perfect. How did you come to learn so much about our kingdom?"

"My governesses gave me an extensive education."

"Goodness," said Lydia. "They must have been wonderful."

Claire paused briefly and smiled. "Yes, they were."

Lydia nodded in understanding.

Claire's response, incidentally, was no lie; her governesses were among the most eminent ladies in all of Noston. Furthermore, to use the exact terms, she had received more than just a lady's education. She had been trained to be a queen. Betrothed to Asbert since she was small, Claire lacked for nothing in her education, from etiquette and deportment to dancing and high culture. *I had finishing lessons to be a queen in Noston*, Claire thought. *Thus I have, more or less, a basic knowledge of its neighboring kingdoms, their geography, and such.* Vik had told her that she would soon begin her own queenly finishing lessons here in Paffuto, but she and Vik were still only sixteen, far too young for marriage. She imagined it would take some time; their wedding would be no

hastily thrown-together affair.

“In Paffuto, one marries when one is about twenty-five,” Lydia told her. “Ladies can marry a bit earlier, it’s true, but one is never called an old maid if they are not wed before twenty.”

“We have the same practice in my home kingdom as well, Lady Lydia.”

Lydia giggled. “Still, I am sure that you can handle the heavy responsibility and social status of being betrothed to His Highness with perfect aplomb. But isn’t there anything you might like to do before you and he are formally married?”

“Anything I’d like to do?” Claire repeated.

“Yes. Granted, I’m sure you wouldn’t let anything stop you even after being wed.”

Lydia giggled, and as Claire looked at her, she felt as if she’d received an attack from an unexpected quarter. *Come to think of it, she pondered, I suppose that ever since I started my second life, I’ve thought of nothing but finding a way to handle Charlotte.* Claire’s two aims were solely to prevent war between Paffuto and Noston, and to save the futures of her loved ones.

Slightly disoriented, she took stock once more of her core feelings. *First of all, she thought, I need to successfully purify the magical tornado. Then, my big goal for the long-term future is to be with Vik.*

As Claire left school for the day, she reflected that, in spite of her anxieties and frustrations, she was free. As terribly alone as she felt, the thought that she could now live her life however she wanted gave her a curious sense of jubilation. She’d allowed herself a moment of downtime after the graduation gala, and once she succeeded in purifying the tornado, perhaps she could relax a bit and do whatever suited her fancy.

At the thought of that, Isabella suddenly came to mind. Isabella was Claire’s cute, cherubic pupil in her first life, who had encouraged Claire and given her the opportunity to express her feelings to Vik. Last month, Claire had reunited with her in the town of Caltina, albeit in a one-sided reunion. She knew it would be difficult for the two of them to become as close as they once were, but the fact that Isabella looked up to Claire all the same warmed her heart. At their

parting, Claire had written a letter to Baron Reine which she'd entrusted to Isabella, wherein she offered her greetings and added, "I should like to invite Isabella to the detached palace. If it isn't any trouble, I would love to have her assistance." Perhaps a response would be coming any day now.

I wonder if Isabella has the same dream in this life as well, Claire thought. *Oh, nonsense. Of course she wouldn't.* She recalled the night of Vik's ball in her first life, when Isabella had begged her to go with tears in her eyes. The Baron and Baroness Reine had informed Claire about Isabella's dream to one day become a lady-in-waiting at the palace. It was for this reason that Claire now requested Isabella's presence and assistance.

What a precious memory, Claire thought. None but she knew that her charming pupil harbored such a dream. She smiled at the fond recollection as she stepped into her carriage and set off for the detached palace.

No sooner had she entered the palace grounds than Lui called her name.

"Oh? What is the matter?" Claire asked.

"We've received a letter for you."

Claire paused. "A letter addressed to me went to Vik?"

Any letter addressed to Claire would be sent to the detached palace. Yet Lui going out of her way to bring Claire the letter meant that it must have gone to Vik instead. This puzzled Claire.

Lui smiled meaningfully. "Why don't you give it a read?"

Claire took the envelope, turned it over, and saw Baron Reine's name. She started.

"Vik looked over it this morning," Lui explained. "Then he said it should be sent to you."

"This must be the good news he mentioned!" Claire said. "Thank you, Lui."

She opened the envelope on the spot and drew out the letter. It was five pages long. In Baron Reine's polite hand, he wrote his thanks for the kind care she had shown Isabella in Caltina. Claire read on for several seconds more,

holding back her impatience.

“I do ask that you grant me the honor of allowing me to invite your fiancée, the Lady Claire Martino, to visit our estate,’ he says. Oh, Lui!”

Claire looked up in shock, and Lui smiled warmly at her. “Vik was all for it, of course.”

The letter requested permission to invite Claire to the Reine mansion. In Caltina, she had been introduced to Isabella as the prince’s fiancée. No doubt the Reines must have felt that, regardless of how close Isabella and Claire were, they simply could not offer her an invitation without Vik’s permission. That was so very like them that it brought back a flood of happy nostalgia.

At the precise moment that Claire returned to her rooms, savoring her happiness, a second envelope arrived. It contained two letters, one from the baron and baroness, the other from Isabella. Just as Claire expected, both entreated her to come visit them at their mansion.

In the past, I never would’ve expected such a thing could be possible, she thought. Oh, I’m ever so happy.

At once, she penned a response to inquire about the date and time of her visit. And then she drifted off in bliss, her mind filled with thoughts of the rose garden that graced the Reine family home.

On the next weekend, Claire set off in a carriage to the Reine estate, accompanied by Vik, Dion, and Lui.

“Are you sure it’s quite all right for you to join me today?” Claire asked.

“Absolutely,” Vik said. “Even had I stayed home, I would’ve had nothing to do.”

Claire hesitated before saying, “Is that so?”

Lui said nothing, but her eyebrow twitched, a fact which did not escape Claire. No doubt he was inconveniencing Keith and Denis, both of whom had stayed behind at the palace. *I can only imagine their difficulty*, she thought. For their sakes, she vowed to not stay long.

Yet just as she did so, a sweet, gentle scent wafted through the air. She looked diagonally across from her and saw Dion stealing a peek into the gift basket they carried with them.

“Ah, so we’re bringing them baked goodies, huh?” he said. “Cookies, a pie, scones—oh boy, I can’t wait for teatime now.”

“That we are,” Claire said. “You remember meeting Isabella in Caltina, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course. We talked quite a bit, and I came away with the impression that we got along superbly. She’s a lovely, smart little thing.”

“Yes, and her parents are such delightful people as well. I know you’re going to love them.”

“I can’t wait to meet them.”

Vik and Lui watched the conversation wordlessly with grins on their faces, which pleased Claire. She clasped her hands together tight. *Vik is constantly trying to share my good memories so I don’t have to keep them all to myself anymore*, she thought.

Upon arrival, Claire was escorted into the salon that looked out upon the gardens. She found the room to be exactly as she remembered it. The garden-facing wall was fitted with glass, allowing one to admire views of the estate, and the scent of roses drifted in from an open window. Because Claire harbored a one-sided acquaintanceship with the maids and a familiarity with the furnishings, the whole environment brought back wistful memories for her.

The Reines greeted her with the same smiles they always wore. “It is my great honor to welcome you to our humble home,” said Baron Reine.

“We’ve been so eager to have you visit,” said the baroness.

“This mansion is incredible,” Dion whispered. “It’s as fancy as my place back home.”

The baron, who had evidently overheard Dion, chortled cheerfully. “We are nouveau riche, as you can no doubt tell. My father was only a life peer, but I

amassed a fortune some fifteen years ago. I had not the faintest idea what to do with it, so I donated to the kingdom and the church at random. For that, they granted us the honor of our title.”

“Indeed,” added the baroness. “Why, I grew up as a mere town girl. Even now that I’ve suddenly been transported into high society, I’m afraid I don’t know my right from my left. It’s quite the troubling situation.”

Oh, this does bring me back, Claire thought. The Reines’ tale made her blink as she recalled the time when she had just arrived at the capital city, the wounds of her broken heart still fresh. They’d welcomed her as a governess for their beloved daughter and treated her with warmth even though they knew little of her background. Evidently, the Reines were no different now than they were before. *This warmth is liable to make me cry,* she thought.

As Claire was involuntarily lost for words, Vik came to her rescue as if it were second nature for him. “As a member of the royal family, I thank you for all that you have done for our kingdom,” he said. “Now that I have a chance to talk with you further, I see that my good first impression of you was entirely correct.”

“Your Highness remembers us!” Baron Reine exclaimed.

“But of course,” said Vik. “I recall we met last at the spring flower jubilee.”

“Yes, you are perfectly correct,” said the baron, stumbling over his words. “And I am still working most assiduously on the land policy you so kindly complimented me on when we were first introduced.”

The baron sounded so elated that Lui, watching from the side, smiled elegantly and responded, “The prince has been following your work with great interest.”

“Oh? Goodness, you are too kind.”

Considerately, Vik and the others carried on the conversation for Claire after she fell silent. As members of the monarchy and aristocracy, everything from their choice of topic to their conversational etiquette was impeccable. With them here, Claire thought the Reines might never notice her atypical sentimentality.

When she had moved to the palace in her first life, the Reines had held a

farewell party for her in this very salon. As the fond memories gave Claire a lump in her throat, a charming and ever so slightly angry voice demanded, “Mother, father, is it my turn yet?”

Claire looked over, and there stood Isabella, dressed in a pale cherry-colored gown. No doubt she had grown tired of waiting, Claire assumed. Isabella’s cheeks puffed up in a slight pout, as sulky as the tone of her voice.

“Heavens,” her mother gently chided her. “I thought I instructed you to wait until you were called.”

“I couldn’t help it,” Isabella said. “I was curious. Lady Claire is...” The girl paused and then, stumbling over her words, admitted, “Lady Claire is my friend.”

Claire started internally at this unexpected sentiment. The adults exchanged glances and then looked at Isabella fondly. The intelligence in her eyes and her reserved, dignified deportment lent her a maturity beyond her years. Yet she was just like a little girl in how she could not bear to wait before coming to greet her guests.

Claire moved to stand before Isabella and curtsied. “Good day, Lady Isabella,” she said.

“Lady Claire!” Isabella cried. “Oh, how I’ve missed you.”

“How have you fared since your return from Caltina?”

“I wrote about the day we spent together in my diary!” Isabella said, tripping over her tongue to get the words out. “I keep reading it over and over!”

“Oh my.” A smile automatically broke out across Claire’s face at Isabella’s happy reply. *This really is Lady Isabella*, she thought. *She is no different from the girl I knew, from the way she treasures her memories down to the way she spends her holidays.*

Vik, watching Claire and Isabella’s exchange, spoke up. “Say, did I hear that your lordship is searching for a governess for Miss Isabella?”

“That we are,” said the baron. “But I’m afraid the applicants haven’t been very forthcoming. Even if I do manage to have them come and meet us, they

almost always turn us down once they find out we are new money.” Baron Reine chuckled.

“That must be difficult,” Vik said. He paused before continuing. “You know, I think I have the perfect candidate in mind.”

“A person Your Highness could introduce to us?”

“Yes indeed,” said Vik. “Naturally, she’d be superb for educational matters, but she is also just the person you need to inform your daughter on the etiquette required of a lady.”

Vik? Claire wondered, bewildered. She’d heard nothing of this before.

Next to her, Isabella cried, “I’m to have a governess?” Her eyes lit up.

“Yes, but she is here studying abroad from a neighboring kingdom, and she is also my dear fiancée,” Vik said. “She won’t be able to board with you, as one can imagine.”

Claire gasped in surprise. *Could this be what I think it is?* she thought.

Vik had appeared to her to be ever so busy these days; even today, Keith and Denis were stuck at the palace despite it being a weekend. Yet in spite of that, Vik had chosen to come with her. Claire’s hopes swelled as she imagined the reason why.

“Miss Claire Martino would be quite suitable as a governess for your daughter, I should think,” Vik said. “Naturally, as she has a full-time guard—a Mr. Dion—with her, I think it possible she could stop by your mansion on her way home from the Academy.”

Claire started again. Just as she’d hoped, Vik was endorsing her as a governess.

She knew her cheeks were turning red due to this unexpected development, one beyond her wildest dreams. She wanted to leap for joy but just managed to suppress the urge and merely watch the conversation. Meanwhile, Dion and Lui, whom Claire realized were already fully in the know, greeted Vik’s proposal with smiles of agreement.

“It shouldn’t be a problem if you come home late so long as I’m with you,”

Dion said.

“Unlike a certain gentleman I could mention,” Lui said, “this young lady is the picture of good manners. I’m sure she will find your company much less tiring than performing her fiancé’s royal duties for him back at the palace.”

Vik paused in the face of such a cutting remark and awkwardly cleared his throat. “*Thank you, Lui.*”

The Baron Reine, too stunned to do anything but follow up with the most perfunctory of nods, still sounded dazed when at last he asked, “Do you truly mean that Lady Claire would do us the honor of serving as our daughter’s governess?”

“Whether she will or not is a matter to be discussed with the lady herself,” Vik said eloquently, his gaze shifting to Claire.

However, there was no need to check with her. Claire had already made up her mind. *What a delightful offer!* she thought and replied, “But of course. Ever since our first meeting, Lady Isabella and I have been the closest of friends. Nothing would please me more than being of assistance to her.”

“Oh, father, mother, Lady Claire!” Isabella exclaimed, flushing. “Are you really sure?”

Everyone apart from the baron and baroness looked at her with affection. Her parents, conversely, remained rigid with shock. They must’ve been struggling to come to terms with the swiftly progressing situation, Claire supposed.

She took over for them and bent down slightly so as to be at Isabella’s eye level. “Lady Isabella,” she began. “Ah, pardon me, should I call you my mistress instead? Thank you for having me.”

“Oh no!” Isabella protested. “Oh, but Lady Claire... The pleasure is all mine!”

Isabella’s eyes swam with tears as she beamed. She looked just as happy as she professed to be, and Claire had a feeling she wore a matching grin herself.



I'm delighted that I could come back to this, she thought, *but I am just as happy to have everyone's kindness.* She doubted she would have been able to rekindle her connection to the Reines on her own. As she watched Isabella grin in delight befitting a child of her tender age, Claire's heart filled with gratitude towards Vik and her other friends.

Thus, Claire succeeded in obtaining the post of the Reines' governess. She and Dion were to stop by several times a week on their way home from school, which would, Claire was sure, not interfere with either her schooling or her imminent queenly finishing lessons.

Incidentally, Vik suggested they draw up a contract of employment, but Baron Reine would not hear of it. One simply couldn't "employ" the fiancée of the heir to the throne, he insisted. However, after a logical explanation from Lui and a gentle nudge from Dion, Isabella told her father, "We don't want to steal too much of Lady Claire and His Highness's time together," and thus the contract was signed with no more fuss.

This, too, warmed Claire's heart.

With the to-do over the contract complete, Claire stood by the salon window and waited for the now-cool tea to be rebrewed. Spring had come to the rose garden, and the view was gorgeous.

"What lovely roses," she said. "Their light, spring coloration gladdens my heart."

"You are quite the connoisseur of roses, Lady Claire," said the baroness, surprised.

Claire started and immediately clammed up. *That's true,* she thought to herself. *We talked about the roses so often in my first life that I brought them up completely out of habit.*

The Reine mansion rose garden was the baroness's favorite haunt. Although she had her servants' help, the baroness was deeply involved in the garden's upkeep. As a result, many of Claire's conversations with the baroness that did not revolve around Isabella naturally turned into discussions of the garden.

After a brief pause, Claire smiled. She could have changed the topic and moved on, but instead she chose to say, “I once had the pleasure of being looked after by a lady who tended her rose garden with the utmost care.”

“Heavens,” said the baroness. “Indeed?”

Claire paused again. “I remember her very fondly.”

The baroness chuckled. “Well, anyone who loves roses couldn’t possibly be a bad person.” She smiled, almost as if she were about to add a joking “Like me.” Claire smiled back.

Baron Reine, evidently observing their conversation from a slight distance, murmured with accidental candor, “I almost feel as if I’ve gained a second daughter.”

“Goodness, darling, whatever are you saying?” chided his wife. “I’m ever so sorry, Lady Claire.”

“Oh no, not at all,” said Claire. “I’m quite glad to hear it.”

She smiled back and fought to stifle the slight tears that threatened to blur her vision. It was almost as if she could hear that same sentiment repeated once before in happy days gone by.

Starting the following week, Claire began to visit the Reine mansion on her way home from the Academy. As she and Isabella sat side by side in Isabella’s bedroom, Claire pointed to a page in the girl’s textbook.

“There are many types of fiends,” she informed her charge. “Mistress, have you ever seen a fiend before?”

Isabella tripped over her words. “Why, no! I’ve only ever seen such strange creatures in books.”

“As have I. Just as how some people are born with magic power, fiends result from variations in animals gifted with magic. It is rare to encounter them as it is, but we also wear wards in order to repel such creatures.”

“So wearing wards stops us from running into them?” Isabella asked.

“No, not exactly. There is a wide diversity of cases of fiend encounters.

Regardless of the measures we take to prevent them, encounters do still happen.”

Isabella trembled slightly in fear at Claire’s explanation. “How frightening. Claire, what should I do if I ever run into a fiend?”

“For the most part, kingdoms dispatch their knight orders to take care of them,” Claire said. “But for more concrete countermeasures, we can learn from examples of previous cases. At any rate, this concludes today’s lesson.”

She closed the textbook, and Isabella sighed. “We’re done already? My study time with you always passes in the blink of an eye.”

“The time flies for me as well,” Claire said. “I enjoy how you attend to your lessons with such fervor.”

For instance, today’s lesson was a module on all sorts of dangers to be learned before studying wards. Claire had begun teaching Isabella a few of the basics of magic in addition to her regular curriculum in order to prepare for Isabella’s baptism in two years’ time. Noble children studied a plethora of information about magic in this manner so as to be ready to cast spells upon being baptized at fifteen.

Isabella was, as ever, such a good child in how she begged to learn more from Claire. Furthermore, Claire was not the only one to whom Isabella opened up immediately.

“Thank you for everything today, Claire and Dion. It’s like having a big brother and sister,” Isabella said.

Dion, who was otherwise always at ease, became visibly flustered. “I’m like a brother to you?” he stuttered. “What makes you say that?”

“Oh!” Isabella cried. “I’m sorry. I just did it without thinking. Because Claire’s like a sister to me...” She trailed off.

“Ah, I see,” said Dion. He paused for a moment before saying, “Well, that’s perfectly fine with me. Me, your brother? Yeah, I can be your big brother.”

Blinking, he rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. Isabella turned bright red, realizing that she’d gone too far as Claire looked on, charmed.

Isabella already claimed that Claire was like a sister to her, and perhaps it made no difference that Dion was not her tutor. He still accompanied Claire on her visits to the mansion, thus making him a brother figure. It was a happy thought, but in turn, that happiness left her feeling a little shy and self-conscious.

“Mistress Isabella,” Claire said, “I’m truly delighted to hear you think so highly of us.”

“Then do you think you could join me for tea today?” Isabella asked.

“I would absolutely love to, but I’m afraid we mustn’t stay too late.”

They had agreed to study for no more than two hours per day. While the sky was still bright outside, it would not do to outstay their welcome.

Isabella nodded and gasped in sudden realization. “Oh yes! If I detain you, Prince Vik is sure to worry, won’t he?”

“Er, that’s not exactly what I meant,” Claire said.

Even once she returned home, she would only go to her own rooms. Yes, she was often summoned for a delightful chat with her friends, or Vik would swing by after dinner, but these were not appointments with set times.

Despite Claire’s denial, Isabella gave her a bashful grin for some reason beyond Claire’s understanding. “I’ll back down today,” she said. “But do please have tea with me sometime, should you get an opportunity.”

“Thank you,” Claire said. “Do please ask me again.”

She and Isabella locked eyes and smiled, and then Claire and Dion departed from the Reine mansion.

Upon her return to the detached palace that evening, Claire found Vik waiting for her, cheerfully sipping a cup of tea in her living room. Denis yawned as he sprawled on Claire’s couch opposite Vik. From his exhaustion, she gleaned that the pair had come to see her during a busy period in their duties. Had Lui been there, Claire knew, she would likely have had some wisecrack such as, “Just whose room do you think this is, anyway?” but for her part, Claire enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere.

“Welcome back,” Vik said. “Did you have a good time at the Reines’?”

“I most certainly did,” Claire replied. “I’m having such a lovely time there, thanks to you. Today, you know, Isabella said Dion was like a brother to her. It was so heartwarming.”

“Oh? She’s certainly taken a liking to him, hasn’t she?”

“That she has,” Claire agreed. “You know, I have the feeling that I’ll enjoy myself there even more than I did before.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

The warmth in his voice made Claire smile. She sat down next to him on his couch. “No one told me that you would suggest I become the Reines’ governess, so I was quite startled. Thank you very much, Vik.”

“Had I proposed the idea to you beforehand, I’m positive you would have rejected it. That’s why I chose to make it a surprise.”

“Well, I suppose.”

True enough, she realized. Had he come to her before and asked, “Say, what if I put forth to the Reines that you be their governess?” or some such, Claire imagined she would have refused him on the spot. No matter how much the proposition delighted her, she no doubt would have deemed that her responsibility lay elsewhere. This tendency stemmed from her awareness of her role as the crown prince’s fiancée, but it seemed to Claire that her sense of propriety drove Vik mad. Hence why he, not infrequently, skipped asking her permission in this manner.

“I just hate to see you look so forlorn,” Vik said.

“Oh, Vik, I’m not forlorn in the slightest,” said Claire. “I’m wonderfully happy at present, you know.”

“But you always put yourself last, behind other people and the responsibilities of your position, don’t you? That’s why I’d do anything in my power for you. I swear, you will never feel the same pain you once suffered in your first life.”

Claire made no response. She felt as if a simple “thank you” wouldn’t be enough to convey her gratitude for how Vik always thought of her and brought

her desires to life.

As she fell silent, unsure of what to say, Vik reached out to touch her cheek. Her heart raced, and she felt a slight heat pool in her cheeks.

But just then, Denis emitted an enormous sigh, and Vik remembered they had company.

“Hey,” Denis said, “could you guys not make googly eyes at each other when Dion and I are around? Sure, none of us want Claire feeling lonely, but I guess the same can’t be said for the guardsmen, huh?”

Claire flushed and darted away from Vik. “I’m sorry, Denis!” she exclaimed, stumbling over her words.

Denis grinned at her to show he’d already forgiven her. “It’s all good. Our problem’s with Vik, not you.”

Vik paused before saying, “I take it all the paperwork is finished?”

“Nah, there’s still a ton left,” Denis complained. “It’s going to be a real hassle when we get back, and you know Lui’s going to be spitting mad.”

Claire cocked her head inquisitively. “Are things really so busy right now?” she asked.

“That they are,” Vik said. “My investiture is to be in precisely one year’s time—to be enthroned as the crown prince, that is. The preparations are making us busier by the minute.”

Claire started. *That’s right*, she thought. *Vik will be invested as crown prince next year.* But that would all be after the magical tornado. She tensed once more, even though Vik’s tenderness and affection had begun its work of mellowing her earlier.

“I was hoping to ask you to stand with me at the ceremony,” Vik said. “As my fiancée.”

“Me?” Claire repeated. “Stand with you?”

She took her time ruminating on the connotations of that. Regardless of her origin as a member of a prominent ducal house of Noston, without Vik’s or Asbert’s backing, she was a mere nobody. Claire could easily imagine that she

might need something else to silence the criticisms if one such as her married into the royal family. *In my first life*, she thought, *I was lauded as a hero for purifying a magical tornado of unprecedented size.*

Yet that renown was a double-edged sword, as Claire was well aware. After spending her whole life learning what it would take to be a queen, she knew that she would need more than just one thing to her name. She would need to give her subjects no cause for complaint regardless of what she was faced with. This would repay Vik for all the kindness he had shown her. *So I'd best learn more about Paffuto and its needs*, she thought. She pictured Isabella studying and wished to be someone whom her devoted pupil would not be ashamed of.

Across from Claire with her newfound resolution, Denis and Dion began to snack on their goodies.

"If I'm going to be honest," Dion was saying, "it really threw me for a loop when Isabella said I was like a brother to her. I mean, even my own little sister never calls me her big brother."

"I bet," Denis said. "Your sister doesn't seem like the type at all."

"Yeah, exactly. Whenever she talked to me, she'd always just be rude and glare at me all angry."

Denis laughed. "You may be twins, but when you try to copy Miss Diana, you don't look angry in the slightest."

It seemed a rather delicate topic to Claire, but both boys were awfully lighthearted about it. As she watched the two of them having a grand old time, Vik whispered to her, "You know, I think how warm and friendly the Reines are might be good for Dion."

Claire giggled. "As a matter of fact, I was just having the same thought."

The Reines had once kindly given her their support when she was hurt and trying to get back on her feet once more. *This time*, it occurred to Claire, *I might not be the only one they heal.*

Chapter 14

Once Claire felt adjusted to her new life, her finishing lessons to become queen began piece by piece. One of her instructors was the Marchioness Adelaide Beynon, Vik's aunt and younger sister of the king.

As she put away the textbooks, the marchioness remarked in wonder, "Miss Claire Martino, not only do you have perfect manners, but everything from your knowledge of foreign geography to your grasp of foreign languages is simply superb."

"You flatter me far too much," Claire said.

"Now I wonder what else I could possibly teach you. If I recall correctly, you mentioned you were the chosen candidate for the Queen of Noston since birth, no?"

"That I was," said Claire. "I've received an education on all sorts of subjects ever since I was quite small."

"That explains it, then, doesn't it? But I fear this puts me in a difficult situation." The marchioness smiled kindly in a manner rather reminiscent of Vik and then pondered the issue.

"Perhaps I could learn more about Paffish culture and history?" Claire suggested.

"Yes, but from the look of things, we'll be finished with that in no time at all. Miss Claire, haven't you read most all the history books and peerage records we have here?"

Indeed Claire had. Including that which she had studied in her first life, Claire had by and large applied herself to every topic covered in finishing lessons. That wasn't an issue, per se, but Claire did feel guilty for the trouble it presented to her teacher.

"I suppose you came to Paffuto as you had nothing else to learn in Noston, is that correct?" the marchioness asked.

“Yes,” Claire said. “Well, or something of the sort.”

Claire judged it would not be wise to go into more detail, as it would likely only worsen the marchioness’s poor impression of Noston, so she let the matter rest. She forced herself to smile to smooth over the matter.

The marchioness sighed once more as if to imply she wasn’t the least bit surprised. “Paffuto is the better of the two kingdoms in terms of academics, but if we consider what one must learn to be queen...” She paused before continuing. “Both Paffuto’s and Noston’s lessons would be similar in virtually every way. Given how well you’ve been brought up, I fear there is nothing we can teach you.”

“Oh,” Claire said. *So then, what should we do?* she wondered. *Granted, I know I can’t simply do nothing.*

As the two gave the matter some thought, Claire’s teacher looked up with an expression of sudden realization. “I have it,” she said. “What say you take a trip either here or abroad? There’s a world of difference between reading about something in a textbook and seeing it with your own eyes. You know, I did the very same thing once I’d completed the larger part of my own finishing lessons.”

“I might take a trip, you say?” Claire repeated.

“Yes, indeed. Before you become queen, it would be best for you to see the state of the world. Of course, I suppose we would have to be conscious of your position as Prince Vik’s fiancée; nevertheless, there should still be things for you to see. Above all, it would be a great practical lesson for you.”

The state of the world, Claire mused. She, Vik, and the rest of their retinue frequently made trips out. They’d visited towns here and there all across Paffuto, but pleasure was the chief aim of such excursions. Perhaps an educational trip was not such a bad idea at that, Claire reflected, as the matter of her finishing lessons gave her instructor such pause. *Come to think of it*, she added to herself, *Vik often makes trips abroad as well.* And indeed, her first encounter with him had occurred at a way station town in Noston.

As Claire thought of Vik freely observing and learning about other kingdoms, she concurred with the marchioness’s suggestion. *With the magical tornado on*

its way, I might have to postpone my travels, she thought. But I should try to look on the bright side.

Thus, she smiled. "Thank you very much. I'll discuss the matter with His Highness at once."

On her way back from her lessons with the marchioness, Claire said to her companion, Lui, "Don't you think it'd be lovely for me to go abroad and learn about other kingdoms?"

"Yes, I think it'd be quite good for you." Lui paused. "Does something about that bother you, by any chance?"

Claire took a moment to respond. "You're so perceptive, Lui." Since she had only asked one simple question, for Lui to have so easily picked up on her anxiety proved that Lui was no ordinary person indeed.

"I'm sure you'll enjoy your time studying abroad," Lui said. "But to be frank, I imagine you're more concerned about this magical tornado business than your current finishing lessons."

"Truth be told," Claire said, "that's exactly how I feel." She nodded earnestly. She wanted to work hard at her lessons, but what good were finishing lessons if she were to vanish from the world as she knew it? Naturally, she could not say as much to Lui, but she would have liked to compare notes about how to purify the tornado while expending as little magic as possible.

As if she had guessed exactly what Claire wanted, Lui offered up her thoughts. "Hmm," she began. "The largest magical tornado in history will form, and you will purify it, correct?"

"Yes. But I fear that I only just managed to pull it off in my last life."

"Only just, you say? You've talked before about running out of magic. Let me guess: Did you use up all your magic in the purification process?"

"Yes," Claire said. "To tell you the truth, I ran out so completely that I was unconscious for several days. I have precious little memory of what happened after I cast my spell. The first thing I remember is waking up in a bed at the palace."

“If you ran out of magic, this tornado must be enormous indeed,” Lui mused. “To begin with, I’ve almost never heard of anyone making a tornado vanish by purifying it.”

“I absolutely do not want to run out of magic this time around. I’ve heard it said that the more one practices with magic, the less power is expended, but I just don’t know.” Claire hesitated a moment before continuing. “I believe I’ll have an easier time of it now, but I wish I could be certain.”

Before, when Claire had confessed that this was her second life, she’d claimed that running out of magic had been the impetus to rewind time. However, in order to prevent anyone from worrying more than was necessary, Claire had chosen not to elaborate further. Should she discuss it with them, she feared they would come up with some other strategy to combat the tornado that did not involve purification. But having seen that caliginous sky in her first life, Claire knew other methods were not an option.

Lui looked at Claire curiously. Claire, ever the measured sort, did not typically use such language as “absolutely” and “certain.” However, after thinking for a moment with a somber expression, Lui spoke as if something had just occurred to her. “All right. I have a good idea that can work concurrently with your trip abroad. Let’s talk to Vik about this first.”

Several days later, Vik came to tea at Claire’s apartments in the detached palace. Claire wasted no time before broaching the topic at hand. “Vik,” she said, “I am considering going abroad for the sake of my studies.”

Vik started and choked on his tea, producing a coughing noise quite unlike him.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

He set his teacup down upon the table and scowled, peevish. “So I take it you’ve already heard the news?”

“What news?”

She hadn’t heard a thing. She had planned to talk with him today about her trip abroad and how to approach the magical tornado, but that was all.

Vik gathered from Claire's blank expression that he had arrived at the wrong conclusion. "Never mind," he said. "I'll tell you later, but you can go ahead and talk first."

"Thank you. Well, I was thinking I would like to begin with a trip to Lupty, if I could. That was Lui's recommendation."

Once again, Vik choked on his tea and lapsed into another coughing fit.

"Really, are you quite all right?" Claire asked. *What in the world is wrong with him today?* she wondered. Not understanding, she tilted her head in bewilderment.

Still coughing away, Vik wordlessly handed her a letter. A single glance at the creamy white envelope and the lacy pattern which bordered it was all that Claire needed to know the stationery's high quality.

"If you see who sent it," Vik said, "you'll understand why I'm upset."

Claire flipped the letter over and read the signature: Gilbert Héctor Legrange. She recognized the name.

"Prince Gilbert," she said. "Is that not the prince we met at the Royal Aristocratic Academy's graduation gala?"

"One and the same. I never expected him to send this letter so quickly."

It almost sounded to Claire like Vik had been expecting it, but she didn't have the foggiest idea why he would.

When she didn't respond, Vik ran a hand through his hair. "I visit Lupty from time to time myself, you know. Our royal families are quite close, so I'm well acquainted with Prince Gilbert."

"Oh, I see," Claire said. "So what is in the letter?"

"Read it yourself, why don't you?"

Claire was taken aback, bewildered by Vik's sulkiness. He never bothered to hide his feelings from Claire, but what could've possibly caused such blatant, almost childish peevishness?

She opened the letter gingerly, removed three sheets of paper, and scanned

them. Their contents were addressed to Vik. After a handful of customary seasonal greetings, trivial reminiscences about the graduation gala, and other such pleasantries, the prince wrote, “Do please let me invite your fiancée to Lupty.”

“I beg your pardon?” Claire blinked.

Vik, his cheek propped up on one arm, commented with an air of disinterest, “Awfully odd, don’t you think? And he only invited you. Has he gone mad?”

“You do raise a good point,” Claire admitted. *The invitation even operates under the assumption that I am Vik’s fiancée*, she thought to herself. *How strange that Vik himself isn’t included.*

“Personally, I wholeheartedly think it’s ridiculous,” Vik said. “But part of this actually comes from tradition. We can’t reject his offer out of hand.”

“What tradition?” she asked. “Is it customary for the Crown Prince of Paffuto’s fiancée to visit Lupty?”

“That it is.”

Claire had never heard of such a thing before in Noston. She wondered what the purpose of this practice could be.

Vik’s ill humor grew even worse. “To be exact, it’s more that the royal family visits. It doesn’t have to be just the one person. Our two kingdoms have been on good terms for quite some time; it’s customary for members of each royal family to visit one another and broaden our mutual understandings.”

“I see.” Claire paused. “So does that mean he sent us this letter once he learned of our engagement?”

“Yes, but don’t you think he sent it too soon? If you consider the timing, he must have sent it immediately after you met him at the graduation gala in Noston.”

Vik’s explanation fit what Marchioness Adelaide had said. As the king’s sister, she must have visited Lupty herself, Claire supposed. Given that, Claire found the mystery of Vik’s sulking more puzzling by the moment.

However, the invitation was all Claire could have hoped for. “Vik,” she said, “I

have good reason for wanting to make my first visit be to Lupty. I've had something on my mind for quite some time now, and after talking with Lui about it, she and I came up with this solution."

"Lui?" Vik repeated. "You went to talk to Lui before me?"

His upset expression deepened. Claire gathered that he wanted to be the first person she turned to.

Even though she knew he meant his frown as a joke, she hurried to speak so as not to be misunderstood. "That isn't what I meant. You know there is to be a magical tornado at the end of spring, yes?"

"That I do. You mentioned that you purified it."

"Yes, I did. But I'm afraid that doing so in my first life caused me to completely run out of magic. I have no memory of anything from the moment I was done purifying it, and apparently I slept for several days straight afterwards."

Vik hesitated before saying, "That is no time to be traveling abroad, then."

His eyes had been as unguarded as when passing the time with friends, but now his gaze suddenly grew piercing. In the worst cases, running out of magic could mean never waking up, which was, Claire assumed, the cause of Vik's concern. Yet her issue lay elsewhere.

"So you see," she said, "I talked to Lui about ways to combat the tornado, and she told me that the knighthood of Lupty has a training facility with a metered magic room—that is, a room in which one cannot expend more magic than they have."

Vik took a moment to process that. "Huh, I see." He visibly relaxed, albeit still looking slightly put out. Nevertheless, he turned to her with a rational expression, like the future monarch he was.

"We could build a room of our own like that in Paffuto, but it would cost us time and money. We have so many nobles here with powerful magical colors that we would have little use for such a thing; nor do we have future plans to construct one. It would be a relief if you were to go to Lupty and see if you have the requisite magical power for purifying this tornado without expending it all in the process."

“I think so as well. Therefore, I’d like to pay a visit, even if it means taking a break from school.”

“Of course. That would be fine. However...” Vik trailed off, mixed feelings visible on his face.

Claire was puzzled. “Is there something else you’re concerned about? I’d like to visit the metered magic room and learn more about Lupty for the sake of my finishing lessons. And it’s a stroke of good fortune that Prince Gilbert’s invitation arrived when it did. I cannot think of a better opportunity.”

“You’re right.” Vik hesitated before continuing. “It’s just that I don’t know about his invitation to have you come alone. I’m also concerned about the fact that the letter specifies you arrive before the spring is over. I’ve typically visited Lupty on the longer holidays.”

Yes, I also wonder what that means, Claire thought to herself. The tornado she was so preoccupied with would form near the end of spring, which meant that the invitation truly had arrived at the perfect time. Yet it seemed to her that this preyed on Vik’s mind.

“I mean, I just don’t know.” He sighed and looked off into the distance.

Claire tried posing the question as, “Say, I’ve been wondering. Why is it that you are being so obstinate today? You always encourage me to try new things.”

Vik didn’t respond immediately, but he eventually admitted, “I just have my doubts.”

“You have that little faith in me?”

She could understand why the thought of his fiancée leaving for a foreign kingdom might give Vik pause, and she also understood that it was his sense of intuition making him uneasy. However, Claire absolutely had to find a way to purify the magical tornado without draining her magic supply dry, and it made her rather sad to be told in no uncertain terms that her prospects seemed so hopeless.

Seeing Claire that downcast, Vik hurried to shake his head no and explain himself. “No, not at all.”

“Then why?”

Vik hesitated once more. “Prince Gilbert and I are quite similar. At first blush, you might assume he’s an amiable fellow, but he doesn’t let many people in. As a member of the monarchy of an allied nation, I consider him to be a trustworthy person, but—” Here Vik broke off and scrutinized Claire with an acute look. He faltered and then continued. “I fear our tastes may run similar as well.”

Claire took a moment to respond. “Your tastes, you say?”

“Yes. In those we harbor affection for.”

Understanding finally came after several seconds. “Me?” she spluttered. “Prince Gilbert, with feelings for me? Preposterous.”

“No, it could happen,” Vik said. “It looked like he took quite a shine to you when he met you in Noston. Why else would he have been in such a hurry to send this letter? I think we should be on our guard.”

“But,” Claire insisted, “do you really think he’d be so senseless as to make passes at a girl marrying into the royal family of another kingdom?”

“Either way, I won’t stand for it.”

The almost too-childish response reminded Claire that Vik was still only sixteen, just as she was. He always thought about other people or his kingdom as a good prince should, which made these occasional glimpses of this part of him surprising to Claire. *Oh, goodness*, she thought.

She looked at him as he reddened and refused to meet her eyes. Apparently, she realized, this sulking came from nothing more than simple jealousy. It was a relief that there was no more serious cause, but Claire felt herself growing embarrassed.



Claire giggled.

“What?” Vik muttered. “Don’t laugh at me.”

“I know that you do a lot for me,” she said. “But you know, even if someone else did all the same things, I doubt my heart would be so easily swayed.”

Claire knew Vik’s whole heart belonged to her; at the same time, he knew that she had given up something unbearably precious for both their sakes. As they sat side by side on the couch, their eyes met. Neither said a word. Then Vik sighed, cradled Claire’s cheek, and touched his forehead to hers.

“Claire,” he began. “I’ve said something truly wretched and tried to stop you from getting what you want. Would you forgive me?”

She smiled at the evident shame in his voice. “But of course.”

“If you plan to accept this invitation, we don’t have much time. We’d best start preparing for it at once.”

“We should,” Claire agreed. “I ought to reach out to my professors and my finishing lessons tutor, but I’d also like to speak with the Reines. It’s a shame, but we’ll have to postpone Lady Isabella’s lessons while I’m gone.”

“I think we have a perfect candidate to stand in as her tutor, don’t you?”

“I beg your pardon?” Claire slipped out of Vik’s arms and cocked her head in confusion. *Do we?* she wondered.

Just then, the door leading out to the lobby opened noisily, and Dion appeared, bearing a tray with two sets of things for tea and a heap of goodies. It was far more than any two people could eat, which must have meant he intended to share it with them.

Oh! Claire thought. *Now I see what he means.*

Noticing Claire and Vik’s eyes on him, Dion smiled blithely. “Huh, what’re you looking at me for? What’d I do?”



Claire had a curious dream that night. She found herself looking down at a familiar room illuminated by the white light of a fluorescent bulb. No one was

around, save for herself as she stared down at the empty room behind a glass barrier.

A book lay open atop the low table, eye-catching type announcing the imminent release of a new installment in the series. The center of the page was occupied by an illustration of a handsome young man with silver hair and cerulean eyes.

If Riko were here, Claire thought to herself, I have a feeling she'd call him cute. The idea amused her, but just then, a realization struck. *Isn't that Prince Gilbert?*

She would have liked to pick the book up to peruse its contents, but a glass barrier surrounded the room. Claire could touch nothing in it. She squinted, trying to make out the words on the other side of the glass, but she could glean nothing save for a trivial summary and that he was to appear as a part of the main cast in this latest installment.

"An all-new game. Solve the mystery of Lupty as the kingdom faces destruction"? I must say, this is quite a departure from the rest of the series. The fun of the last game was the main character climbing the social ladder, Claire thought. There was hardly a common thread running through them at all. If Riko were here, she probably would have had some blistering criticism to make.

At that very thought, the glass-covered room receded into the distance. *I must be waking from my dream,* Claire thought.



Noston was situated quite far from Lupty; the same could not be said for its larger cousin, Paffuto. However, Paffuto made up for that with its enormous size—too enormous, really. Charlotte knew that those devices called portals could be an option, but evidently, they were not going to use one on this occasion. Thus, it took her several weeks to reach her destination.

A new school term at the Royal Aristocratic Academy would be just about to begin at this time of year, but now that Nicola Windsor had usurped her place as head of the student council, Charlotte Martino no longer harbored any attachment to the Academy. Now, she exulted in her new life. She smiled dreamily at the feel of her brand-new dress and savored the comfort of the

plush couch beneath her.

“This Lupty place is so different from Noston and Paffuto,” she commented. “It’s really bright and colorful, and I love all these clear glass furnishings! Plus, the dresses are so darling!”

“I’m pleased to hear that,” said her companion. “I think Lupty is a perfect fit for you and your charming attitude.” Giving her a genteel smile, the young man sitting across from Charlotte lifted a teacup to his lips. He was none other than the second-eldest Prince of Lupty, Gilbert Héctor Legrange. Behind him perched a snow-white owl, its amber eyes twinkling.

“A charming at-ti-tude, you say,” repeated the owl. Such was how the bird spoke. Incidentally, this comment was delivered with great incredulity.

Charlotte disliked the owl, but nothing else gave her cause for dissatisfaction. She had been in Lupty for several days now, enjoying Gilbert’s patronage and wanting for nothing in a suite of guest chambers in the royal palace.

“Prince Gilbert, I’d love to do some shopping,” she said. “Didn’t you promise that you’d bring some merchants around for me?”

“Oh yes, my apologies. I believe they will come by this afternoon.” The prince paused. “By the by, when might I see this white magic of yours? I’m frightfully curious about it.”

Charlotte started. “Ah. Well.” A cookie almost lodged in her throat, until she washed it down with tea. She had persistently avoided this topic and given Gilbert elusive answers for weeks. *What’s he so hung up on my white magic for anyway?* she groused internally. *I can’t exactly tell him I can’t cast magic anymore!*

It appeared to her that Gilbert’s invitation and all the pleasures that had come with it were rooted in no more than an interest in her magic. She knew she had caused quite the brouhaha at the graduation gala, but Gilbert seemed ignorant of the details, a fortuitous fact which led to Charlotte receiving such warm hospitality. Even she, of all people, understood that it would spell disaster for her if he discovered she couldn’t do even one whit of magic. That left her with no choice but to expend every effort to disguise that fact.

Charlotte giggled. “Oh, but I can’t whip out my magic for any old thing, you know! Mine is a special power, after all.”

“Is it indeed?” Gilbert asked. “The sort that only presents itself in moments of great need, I suppose?”

“You got it!”

She dispatched yet another sunny grin befitting of a main character, and Gilbert smiled back like a prince.

“Lupty has a strange curse cast upon us. Now that you’re here, perhaps we can lift it.”

“A curse, you say? My, my.”

Naturally, she couldn’t tell him that she lacked the ability to lift the curse. Charlotte popped another sweet into her mouth to mask her panic. She brushed the crumbs off in a very unladylike gesture, making Gilbert’s eyes widen in alarm as if he had witnessed something he was not meant to see. Yet Charlotte did not care a fig. Even without her powers, she had still been scooped up by one real hottie of a prince in a truly lovely kingdom.

Here’s where it all really begins, she thought. *I bet this’ll be the start of my Cinderella story!* There was no doubt in Charlotte’s mind: she was *still* the main character.

Chapter 15

The drawing room of the Paffish royal palace chiefly served none save the royal family. Paintings and other works of art adorned the walls, and its white furnishings lent this room, with its distinctively enormous windows, extra light and cheer. Claire had never visited the drawing room before but just managed to hold back her anxiety.

“Are you nervous, Claire?” Vik asked.

“Yes, but of course I am,” she said.

Vik’s voice did not betray so much as a modicum of tension, in direct opposition to the way Claire felt, even as she tried to smile elegantly. Her apprehension was only to be expected. Today marked the day of Claire and Vik’s engagement ceremony.

In addition to the two of them, both the King and Queen of Paffuto as well as Oscar—the present head of the Martino family—sat in attendance in the drawing room. However, no one made conversation with one another, and there was a solemn feel to the occasion. Claire wore a long white gown while Vik stood in a white dress uniform. The others were likewise outfitted in formal attire, furthering Claire’s anxiety.

But this was still better than the alternative. Typically, royal betrothal ceremonies were gaudy affairs that drew sizable turnouts of nobles, albeit without the sheer pomp and circumstance of royal weddings. Even so, they required enormous amounts of time to prepare and usually could not be as off the cuff as this one. However, at the king’s insistence, the signing of papers and a ceremonial dinner limited to the couple and their families would serve as their engagement ceremony.

“You are both still sixteen,” the king had explained. “Your duty is to your schooling, and there is no need for excessive extravagance. If you want to hold a fancy wedding, then do so in a couple of years.”

To that, Vik complained to Claire, “What a poor excuse.”

In truth, the reserved ceremony seemed meant to curb any dissatisfaction, no matter how slight, any might feel regarding the prince taking a mere schoolgirl from abroad as his bride. The thoughtfulness behind it warmed Claire’s heart. *It’s only natural*, she thought, *as I’m a perfect stranger to the people of Paffuto*. To Claire, it had been odd indeed that the king and queen had gone so far in giving her such a warm welcome.

The two doted on her as if she were their own daughter. The sight of it made clear as day how highly they trusted Vik’s judgment. They knew their pride and joy, the future heir to the throne, would not err in his choice of partner. It reminded Claire all over again how wonderful Vik was. He seemed like a completely different person from the young man who often shared japes with his retainers or, as of late, exhibited such jealousy over Claire. It thrilled her how much he had opened his heart to her.

The witness to their engagement announced, “I have here your vows of betrothal. Would the couple please step forward?”

Claire glided up. A white desk stood by the window, and upon it lay a ceremonial quill pen and a paper stipulating the terms of their engagement. She recalled signing such an oath back in her first life before their trip to Noston. Then, not even a one of her family had stood beside her to bear witness. But now Oscar was here with her, and nothing in the world could have brought her greater happiness. Incidentally, the holy woman Lady Anne had professed a desire to come as well, but Claire had declined in favor of her aunt attending her future wedding. Noston had but one holy woman, and Claire would not entertain the notion of calling her away from duty for personal matters.

“Once you’ve read through the terms, your signatures, if you’d please.” The witness placed the piece of paper backed by a leather frame in front of the couple. Vik signed first, followed by Claire. She had not the slightest intention of ever turning back on her promise, but all the same, she had to work to hide her anxiety so as to prevent the letters from coming out shaky.

“You don’t look nervous at all,” Vik told her. “Impressive.”

“Oh, hush,” she said. “I’m fine.”

Claire heard the king and queen share a quiet chuckle at their banter, and the proceedings felt a little less formal. It crossed Claire's mind, as she managed to survive the last of the ceremony, that she and Vik had once had an exchange to this very same effect before.

The banquet was held afterwards, and as could only be expected, the topic of conversation drifted to Charlotte's flight and subsequent disappearance.

Oscar lowered his knife and fork and bowed to the king, queen, and Vik. "I'm afraid we have yet to find my sister Charlotte. We have been doing everything we can, but I must sincerely apologize that our efforts have yet to bear fruit."

"My lord Oscar, you do not need to apologize," said Vik. "We're conducting our own searches as well. But even if we do not find her, her ability to use magic is nigh on nonexistent. I am sure that as her older brother, it must be difficult for you that we lack a way to hold her accountable for her crimes, but the fact that she cannot harm anyone now is the silver lining in this cloud of misfortunes."

"Your Highness, I am most grateful for your solicitude."

Oscar lowered his head humbly. Noston had been entrusted with the task of cleaning up the series of events Charlotte had set off at the Royal Aristocratic Academy's graduation gala. As the Duke Martino had been brainwashed and rendered incapable of making proper judgments at the time, Oscar was firmly requested to replace him as the head of the family. Claire's father had left the royal capital where he'd lived for so long and now, she heard, resided modestly in the countryside within his duchy. As the new head of the household, Oscar had succeeded the pressing need to restore their lineage's credibility and allow it to be seen in a new light.

"We plan to disinherit Charlotte, but once she's found, we'd like to send her to the abbey in northern Noston," said Oscar.

Vik paused in his eating, a quizzical expression on his face. "The abbey, you say?" Claire assumed that his surprise stemmed from the fact that abbeys in Paffuto did not offer the same sorts of services.

"Among other duties, the abbey rehabilitates criminals," Oscar explained.

“We think it best for lawbreakers to reflect on the gravity of their crimes over a long period of time instead of being imprisoned.”

“I see,” Vik said. “From what I know of Charlotte, I daresay losing all ties to the outside world would be the greatest hell there is for her.”

“Certainly. But I understand we must necessarily find her first.”

Despite being present for what should have been a happy occasion, Oscar paled as a cold sweat trickled down his brow. Claire understood his feelings well as his sympathizer in this matter. Yet the sole thing she could not agree with him on, try as she might, was the notion of leaving Charlotte in the abbey’s hands.

I must have talked to Charlotte any number of times, she thought, and that never made a bit of difference. I can’t imagine she would turn over a new leaf and repent now, even without her white magic.

Charlotte made mischief as easily as she drew breath, believed in her own innocence, and lacked so much as a shred of guilt for her crimes. Would a life spent in religious devotion and prayer for universal happiness really make any sort of impact on Charlotte?

As Claire’s thoughts darkened, Vik switched the topic to Charlotte’s current whereabouts. “I’ve done some thinking on that matter myself,” he said. “I wonder if perhaps Miss Charlotte is nowhere in Noston at all.”

This was the first time Claire had heard such a conjecture. Her eyes widened. “Whatever do you mean, Vik?” she asked.

“It doesn’t make any sense that we could have searched high and low without finding her. I can’t picture her falling so far from grace that she would live in the underbelly of society, so the next most likely thing is that she fled to another kingdom in some fashion that didn’t make use of a portal.”

“Now that you say that, it makes sense.”

Claire immediately understood the point of Vik’s argument. Paffuto and Noston, for instance, required no special proceedings to cross their border, as the two kingdoms were on diplomatic terms. Thus if she had assistance, Charlotte could have easily crossed the border without anyone noticing. *That*

means it's also possible Charlotte is here, Claire thought. That she fled to Paffuto.

The abbey Oscar was considering sending Charlotte to for rehabilitation into society was the very same that Claire had planned to seek shelter in during her first life. Ultimately she'd never gone as a result of meeting Vik and his companions, but if events ran their course, Charlotte might lead the same life Claire had meant to follow in her first life. *Of course, with an enormously different set of circumstances*, she reminded herself.

Claire did not detest her half-sister nor want her to suffer some terrible fate, per se. But neither did she want to see Charlotte ruin any more lives than she already had.

This topic was far too grim to tackle at the dinner of her engagement party. Claire sighed.



As the end of spring drew near, Claire's departure for Lupty grew imminent. She would stay for a week, and her schedule of activities ran nearly as long despite the travel time. She would take a portal to the town on the border closest to Lupty and from there ride through the kingdom in a carriage.

Whereas Lui accompanied her on this trip, Dion had stayed behind. Lui checked over the documents outlining the schedule in her hand as she looked out the carriage window to scan their surroundings. "We'll arrive at the capital city, Chaldoux, shortly," she informed Claire. "Once there, Prince Gilbert is to welcome us with a tea party. Afterwards, we'll be given a tour of the royal palace before a banquet this evening. Tomorrow you are to have a tea party with several young noble ladies of a similar age as you; the day after, you'll have a tea party with other members of the nobility. Goodness, this is a regular tea party hell. Denis would be beside himself."

Claire said nothing. The tea party hell notwithstanding, she knew that Lui always assisted Vik in this manner, but it felt odd to have those same attentions now directed at her.

"Claire?" Lui prompted.

“Oh, my apologies. I’m afraid I’m just not quite used to all this yet.”

“Ah, I see.”

Lui put the schedule away and smiled, much to Claire’s relief. As nerve-racking as it was to travel to a neighboring kingdom on her own, with Lui at her side, she couldn’t help but feel she had nothing to fear.

“Truly, I would have been fine to go alone too,” Claire said. “But of course, that couldn’t happen. Thank you for coming with me, Lui.”

“Well, you certainly don’t need a guard in the strictest sense of the word.”

“Indeed, and who else could both guard me and attend to my needs?”

“Well, it’s a great boon to me that you don’t complain about your upcoming schedule,” Lui said. “Would that I could keep serving you even after we’ve returned home.”

Claire had a pretty good idea who the complainer in question was. She and Lui exchanged grins.

“It’s delightful to think of the two of us going abroad together,” Claire said.

“Likewise. Come, let’s enjoy ourselves, shall we? And I suppose I shouldn’t speak too poorly of a certain troublesome prince. He did grant us permission to use the metered magic room.”

“Yes indeed, you mustn’t. I have much and more to thank Vik for.”

Once Claire’s destination was set in stone, Vik had utilized the formal channels to secure her permission to use the facilities of the Luptian knighthood. That would enable her to experiment with means to purify the magical tornado without depleting all her magic, just as she wished. *I’ll make progress on the tornado and my finishing lessons both*, Claire thought. *Excellent.*

Everything was looking shipshape for her trip.

Claire and Lui chatted while admiring the views as they rolled up to the palace of Lupty in its capital city of Chaldoux. There it stood before her: the palace of a faraway land. Claire stepped out of the carriage and drank in the city sights that she’d seen through the carriage window just moments before. She sighed in

delight. “My goodness! Whenever I would see Lupty in books or some such, I always used to think what a magical, marvelous place it is.”

“Isn’t it?” Lui agreed. “All the glasswork is charming, if perhaps otherworldly.”

“Most certainly. It’s almost like the setting of a datin—”

Just as the word almost slipped out, Claire shut her mouth with an internal gasp. *What was I on the verge of saying just now?* she wondered. That it was like the setting of a dating sim? The drawer in her mind normally kept shut could sometimes spring open in such a fashion. Unquestionably, there was some sort of cause-and-effect relationship with her trips to that bedroom, but the memories would return to her with irregularity. Claire had no desire to tell her friends that the world appeared as a fiction to her; naturally, most people would never believe her in the first place. However, her friends could stretch their imaginations, as they were already well aware Claire had traveled back in time to give her life a do-over. It was highly possible they’d readily believe her. Therefore, she could never tell them.

“What’s wrong, Claire?” Lui asked.

“Oh, nothing at all,” Claire said. *I’d best be cautious*, she told herself.

Just as she finished disguising her verbal slipup, Claire found herself in the presence of His Royal Majesty the King of Lupty.

“You would be Miss Claire Martino, I presume?” said the king. “Welcome. You must be tired after your long hours on the road. I’ll see to it that you are escorted to your chambers at once.”

His manner of speech evoked both a sense of dignity and a friendly informality entirely unlike that of both the kings of Noston and of Paffuto. Claire blinked at this monarch who did not fit the mental image of any sovereign she had encountered thus far.

“Your Majesty,” she said, “I am indeed Claire Martino, at your service. I am ever so grateful to be granted this opportunity.”

“It is certainly a special and splendid thing that our two kingdoms can have such an exchange,” the king agreed. “You must see all the sights, the facilities of our knighthood included. Our second-eldest prince, Gilbert, will be the one to

show you around. Do please enjoy his company.”

“You are far too kind. Thank you for your hospitality.”

His consideration relieved her. Just then, a familiar young man stepped into view a short distance away. His exquisite platinum blond hair was like moonlight spun fine, his eyes a cerulean both refreshingly light and possessed of inner depth. As he wore an outfit similar to a dress uniform, Claire supposed he must’ve been here to bid her welcome.

She curtsied to him, acknowledging his approach. “Your Highness,” she said, “I am Claire Martino, at your service. Thank you for coming to greet me.”

Gilbert made no response to Claire’s polite salutation save for a sharp intake of breath. He pressed his lips together firmly. Oddly, his eyes swam with tears; he seemed overcome with emotion. Something was undoubtedly off. Claire had to wonder: What could possibly be the matter? It reached the point where she started to hope that someone would step in and rescue her from the situation, but the king, who had greeted her mere moments before, was already gone.

Confused as she was, Claire decided to try prompting him with a, “Your Highness?”

Yet a response came in the form of a sugary-sweet voice that did not belong to Gilbert, amplified as it echoed off the marble floor and glass furnishings.

“Ohhhhh, Prince Gilbert! Wherever have you gone?”

I know that voice, Claire thought. Her breath died in her throat with a sinking feeling. “Charlotte?” she exclaimed.

A girl dashed out from behind a pillar and looked aghast at the sight of Claire. “Huh? Wh— C-Claire?” she squealed. She was none other than the girl the Martinos had been hunting high and low to find: Charlotte.

Charlotte wore the most expensive gown Claire had ever seen in her life and a hair ornament intertwined in one part of her long, voluminous hair. This was clearly not the appearance of a girl living on the run; it was as plain as the nose on Charlotte’s face that she was living in the lap of luxury.

She pointed at Claire, her rosy pink lips standing out in stark profile. “Bwa...

Wha..." she spluttered.

"I could ask the very same of you," Claire said. "Charlotte, what are you doing here? What would Oscar think if he knew you ran away all the way to Lupty?"

Then, when Charlotte saw Claire at a loss for further words, she regrouped and seemed to regain her presence of mind. She half-hid behind Gilbert, looked up at her sister with pleading eyes, and grinned. Her puff of hair cast shadows across the white marble floor.

"Well, Prince Gilbert invited me here," she explained.

"His Highness did what, now?" said Claire.

"He did, I'm telling you! I was walking through the gardens after I broke out of that cell, and he started talking to me. And good timing, because I wasn't sure where I should go next. So I followed him here!"

Claire made no response.

"That's how I ended up here in this lovely kingdom! You know, I'd barely ever heard of this place before, but it's awfully nice. I'd love to spend the rest of my life here."

Once again, Claire made no comment. In spite of the rapid-fire stream of information from the all-too-carefree Charlotte, Claire's thought process remained stuck in a rut. If she took Charlotte's words at face value, that implied that Gilbert had assisted in her escape. *I can't possibly believe that*, she thought. *But what is she doing here? And why is she so at ease? Oh, never mind all that. I must contact Oscar or Vik at once.*

She shot Lui a sidelong signal with her eyes. Lui appeared to be thinking the exact same thing, as she nodded obediently at once.

However, Lui was not the only one who caught the signal. Gilbert stepped forward and asked, "Would you mind holding off on that?"

Claire could tell that Lui's alarm bells were ringing. Lui said nothing, but Claire checked her own wariness and said with as much composure as she could muster, "And what might we be holding off on, Your Highness?"

"You would like to inform your family about Miss Charlotte's whereabouts, I

should think. However, she is my last resort should the worst come to pass. I'm afraid I cannot send her back to her homeland until spring is well and over."

"Whatever reasons you may have for housing her here, Charlotte is a criminal, charged with casting white magic at the royalty of another kingdom," Claire said. "I cannot acquiesce to your request."

"She cast white magic at the royalty of another kingdom, you say?" Gilbert repeated so as to make sure he understood properly. He sounded oddly upset. Claire inferred from his reaction that he had not heard of this incident before.

That makes sense, she told herself. *Prince Gilbert was at the Royal Aristocratic Academy's graduation gala, but he was only a guest. He never saw Charlotte turning her magic on us.* Up to and including her slipping through their fingers, every aspect of Charlotte's situation was being handled privately. It thus stood to reason that Gilbert should be caught unawares.

As if to confirm Claire's assumptions, Gilbert smiled blithely. "Why, that's incredible," he said. "That proves what a distinguished mage Miss Charlotte is. With your assistance, Miss Claire, I am quite certain we can lift the kingdom's curse."

"What you say makes no sense to me," Claire said. "To begin with, Charlotte's magic—"

She'd meant to continue and explain that Charlotte could no longer perform magic thanks to a special curse that was the birthright of a lineage in Paffuto, but Charlotte interrupted with a shrill scream.

Claire blinked in surprise. "What was that about, Charlotte?"

Charlotte ignored the question and grabbed at Gilbert's arm, oblivious to how she looked to all the watching eyes. "Oh, come on, my prince! You're no fair. What's this curse you keep on talking about? Surely everything will be okay now with me around, right? So won't you pretty please keep it a secret where I am?"

"That will have to depend," Gilbert said. "I'll keep it a secret so long as you cooperate with my plan."

"Oh, thank goodness. Okay, that means we're allies, right? So you should lock up Claire in a magic-proof room! It'd ruin all our plans if she sends word of

where I am.”

Claire started internally, too shocked for words by such an unexpected demand. In spite of the sheer weight of Charlotte’s crimes, the girl showed not so much as a whit of remorse.

Yet surprisingly enough, Gilbert did not comply. “I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Huh?” Charlotte wailed. “But it’ll be a disaster!”

“I assure you, you’ll be quite all right. I won’t let you come to any harm. But with that aside, I need to have a very important conversation with your sister, so would you be a dear and give us a moment alone? Oh yes, and I do believe the merchants will be here soon. They mentioned they’d have plenty of new dresses and jewelry they would love to show you.”

“Ooh, really? Then I’m off to have myself a shopping spree! Remember, it’s a secret that I’m here,” she said, tossing the words over her shoulder in a singsong fashion. Then Charlotte dashed away, her short skirts fluttering behind her, and vanished into the palace.

My goodness, Claire thought. How did we end up here? From the looks of it, we will need to pull some strings with the official channels of the Paffish government. She knew she should waste no time and catch hold of Charlotte by the arm, but she was too stunned to move.

Lui evidently decided it best to talk with Gilbert instead of trying to waylay Charlotte here and now. Calmly, she said, “As you are surely aware, Lady Claire is Prince Vik’s significant other. If something were to happen to her in the course of you catering to Miss Charlotte’s whims, I’m afraid that would be no simple matter to resolve.”

“As one could assume, yes,” said Gilbert.

“Forgive my impertinence, but I don’t believe you remotely understand the situation you are in.” The look on Lui’s face never wavered, but she was the sole member of Claire’s guard here. She could not afford to let anything happen, and this incident showed unmistakable signs of major trouble.

There can only be one reason Prince Gilbert is sheltering Charlotte and treating her with such warm hospitality, Claire thought, and that must be her

white magic. She had no idea why he was gathering people with exceptional magical colors here, but before she could look into that, she needed to clear up his misunderstanding. Then she would have to do something about this hostility.

Claire smoothly interposed herself between Gilbert, Lui, and their civil face-off. “Your Highness,” she said, “I fear there has been a grave misunderstanding.”

“Of what sort? Please understand that I have no intention of sending Miss Charlotte away, no matter what you might say. I fully plan to propose that she be kept here for a few more weeks until the end of spring, even if I must ask through the official channels.”

“You are offering sanctuary to Charlotte because of her magic, are you not?”

“My apologies, my lady,” Gilbert said, “but I cannot share the details with you, no matter your august personage. One never knows what might happen, you see. I would prefer to avoid the unexpected.”

We are talking at loggerheads, Claire thought. She blinked a few times in quick succession, and then a wave of exhaustion overtook her. This Gilbert fellow had assisted Charlotte in her escape, yet in spite of that, Claire simply could not imagine him formulating any sort of sinister plot. So what in heaven’s name could be going on? But never mind about that, she decided. She needed to tell him the truth.

She eschewed all vagaries and got straight to the point. “Your Highness, Charlotte’s white magic has been disabled.”

“Yes, yes, I understand her white magic makes her quite an eminent mag— I beg your pardon?”

“Her white magic has been disabled, Your Highness.”

Gilbert paused for a moment. “What? Pardon me, but what?”

His eyes opened wide in shock, his perfect smile going slack-jawed. As the peculiarly idiotic expression overtook his fine features, Claire sensed Lui next to her struggling to keep a straight face.

Claire judged that her assumption about Gilbert sheltering Charlotte due to her magic was more or less spot-on. As he stood there flabbergasted, she politely explained, “There is a special magic spell in Paffuto permitted to none save a certain family. We used that spell to make Charlotte unable to work her own magic. For you see, she was attempting to bend her friends, family, and even the monarchy to her will.”

“That cannot be true.” Gilbert paused. “Do please hold on a moment. Miss Charlotte, she—she never breathed as much as a word about this.”

As Lui watched Gilbert panic, she murmured, “Why would a criminal on the run tell the truth about a matter like this? Is he a fool?”

“Do please hold on,” Gilbert said. Then he paused again. “You’re right. Now that you mention it, Miss Charlotte hasn’t used magic once while she has been here. Even her wards were cast by someone else. I assumed that it was because she is so special, but perhaps not.”

He paled and reeled.

Claire delivered one final blow. “Your Highness, as I am not sure what might occur here, do please allow us to violate the diplomatic custom surrounding wards.”

“Pardon?”

“If anything were to happen here as a result of you giving Charlotte asylum, I am afraid it would develop into a terrible to-do. It would be lovely if you could grant me permission to cast my own wards to prevent such a thing from happening.”

Right in front of the flabbergasted Gilbert’s eyes, Claire chanted the words of the spell to the spirits and cast a ward. Her palms filled with sparkling light that went on to wreath her body.

“Marvelous!” Gilbert gasped. “Is this your magical power?”

“Yes, and by your leave, we will keep these wards about us during the course of our stay,” Claire said. “I will also alert both Noston and Paffuto about what has occurred here today.”

Gilbert hesitated before saying, “Yes. Do as you will.”

There was no trace of his earlier vigor in the crestfallen young man who slumped before Claire now. *Vik said prior to my departure that he and Prince Gilbert were quite similar, but...I’m afraid I don’t see a resemblance at all.*

As Claire frowned, Lui whispered in her ear, “You’re likely thinking what I’m thinking. If anything, I’m ashamed that I thought for years that Vik was a good judge of character.”

Claire said nothing. As his ladylove, this was a difficult sort of comment to respond to, but the fact that she couldn’t deny it saddened her.

Meanwhile, Gilbert fixed his eyes on Lui and slowly rose to his feet again. He clapped his hands together as if an idea had hit him. “You know, it’s been on my mind this whole time that you’re awfully bold for a lady’s attendant. Say, you wouldn’t happen to be named Sophie, would you?”

“I am not,” Lui said. “My apologies for not introducing myself earlier, but I am Lui Clarke, at your service. I typically serve His Royal Highness Prince Vik of Paffuto as a knight in his guard, but I am at present accompanying Lady Claire instead.”

Gilbert started. “What? How could this be?”

Just as he’d recovered, the handsome expression on Gilbert’s face shattered, once more to be replaced with that foolish, slack-jawed look.

Lui declared serenely, “The confusion is mutual. I’m afraid I don’t understand why you ask. I have never been to Lupty before, so I don’t see why you should be so sure of my name.”

“Ah, well.” Gilbert stumbled over his words.

Lui had made sense, but now Claire was more curious than she. *He said Sophie*, Claire told herself. *How could he know about her?*

The name which had passed Gilbert’s lips just seconds before was that of Claire’s personal maid. In her first life, Sophie had been dismissed unbeknownst to Claire during her sojourn in the dormitories at the Royal Aristocratic Academy, but Sophie accompanied her mistress abroad in Claire’s second life to

attend to her needs. Claire had unwaveringly trusted her since she was small. No matter how she looked at it, Claire thought Gilbert had no reason to know who her maid was. *I feel uneasy*, she thought, *but why? It's almost like there's something on the tip of my tongue.*

But before Claire could ask about it, Gilbert himself made the matter clear. “How odd,” he said. “I could have sworn the name of the protagonist’s—that is, Claire Martino’s—lady’s maid was Sophie. And it’s even odder to find her attended by that lovely lady knight from the lineup of minor characters.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” Lui said, sounding almost annoyed.

Claire started internally and froze in shock. *Protagonist?* she thought. *Minor characters?* The familiar words began to open the drawer in her mind. *Prince Gilbert must be like me. He must know about the other world!* The room she’d seen earlier beyond the glass, the world she’d accidentally been flung into when she ran out of magical energy—Claire was, apparently, not the only person to know of it.

As her mind raced too quickly for her to speak, Claire heard a rustle of wings next to her ear. She turned to look as a white owl flew in and alighted on Gilbert’s shoulder.

And then the owl spoke to her. “Welcome.”

She stumbled over her words. “Uh, thank you for having me...?”

“I am Pooh, at your service. The ma-scot of the new-est install-ment of this ser-ies.”

Claire hesitated for a moment. “Pooh, is it?” Even though she had been drawn into exchanging greetings against her better judgment, none of this made any sense to her.

“Flu-ffy an-i-mals are all the rage these days. We de-ci-ded to be fle-xi-ble and add in one of our own,” Pooh informed her.

“...Er, all right?”

Pooh’s small talk left Claire bewildered, but Gilbert, by way of comparison, regained his composure. “Good, let’s put all that behind us now, shall we? My

sister always used to say there's no time like a crisis. The plans say you'll be staying for a week; is that not so, Miss Claire? But if you would not be opposed, then perhaps we could have you for longer."

This gave Claire pause. "I do not intend to modify the plans."

Gilbert grinned suggestively. "Not even if I swore on my name as the second-eldest Prince of Lupty that I would not hand over Miss Charlotte otherwise?"

Claire started in alarm. Her wariness towards Gilbert escalated as he employed Charlotte as his bargaining chip.

However, Gilbert paid Claire no mind as he stroked the white owl—Pooh—and smiled at her cheerfully. "Pooh here has been waiting for your arrival for quite some time. After all, what's the point in this world without its protagonist, wouldn't you agree?"

"You should not mention that so cas-u-al-ly," Pooh chided. Eager to see her he may have been, but the bird looked extremely displeased.



Once Gilbert finished escorting Claire and Lui to the chambers made up for their stay, he retreated to his own private apartments and was in the process of writing a letter when the answer to his earlier pondering suddenly came to him.

"Ah. That Lui Clarke person is one of Prince Vik's guards, introduced in the first installment of the series." He slapped his knee at the realization. "Now I recall. She appeared for a few moments in the CGs of the graduation gala, and she ended up popular enough, surprisingly, to warrant a named appearance in the first game's DLC. In the main game, Sophie is Claire's trusted companion, but I suppose that isn't the case here." Gilbert paused. "Would a simple bug really make that big of a change? Oh well, no matter."

He retrieved a locked journal from the drawer of his desk and recorded in detail the memory which had just resurfaced. He'd recorded notes in such a fashion for more than a few years now, or so it seemed to him. Gilbert Héctor Legrange had reincarnated into this world with memories of another life wherein he'd been a high school boy with a visual-novel-obsessed older sister. (In passing, it must be noted that the last thing he remembered from his

previous life was toppling down a stairwell. That fall, Gilbert supposed, must have ended his short life.)

Gilbert shared none of his sister's passion for visual novels, which made his life as her younger brother a painful existence indeed. On many occasions, she had forced him to keep her company and stay up watching her play until the wee hours of the morning, thus earning him a rich knowledge of this particular game. However, she had only shown him the latest installment in the series in any great detail. Gilbert knew Claire Martino had been the antagonist of the first game before being elevated to the role of protagonist due to her enormous popularity, but he knew precious little else.

Gilbert had been born and raised as the second-eldest Prince of Lupty before experiencing a strange incident at the age of fourteen. One day, a hit upon the head triggered a return of memories from his previous life. Here in the world of the dating sim, he was one of the characters for the player to woo; perhaps a difficult pill to swallow under normal circumstances, but Gilbert accepted it readily enough and was quite attached to this world. The only thing that troubled him was that the protagonist, Claire, had not come to study abroad, but he figured the matter would solve itself around when he would turn eighteen and the game would begin. However, in his first life, the protagonist never appeared. Gilbert perished without ever learning the reason for her absence, his kingdom no doubt succumbing as well.

The next thing Gilbert knew, he was hitting his head and passing out all over again in a second life. To his surprise, he found that he was once more fourteen years old. He awaited the appearance of the main character, but sure enough, she failed to arrive again. The strong memories of his last death inspired him to endeavor to prevent another demise. Yet he died a second time, and once more the kingdom was lost.

Finally, on his third life he had discovered that the kingdom was locked in a curse. He'd come to the conclusion that, in order to undo said curse, he must unlock the good ending of his route—the Gilbert route. Drawing on the knowledge of his two previous failures, Gilbert had set out to find the protagonist and bring her home.

“But no matter,” he said. “She has finally appeared, and my only goal now is

to successfully win her heart and get the good ending to save the world.”

From what he’d seen of his sister’s game, Gilbert knew the cutscenes of his own route quite well.

“I’ll do everything in my power to make sure Claire ends up on my route,” Gilbert said. “Forget the bad ending; she won’t even get the normal ending on my watch!”

“You dun-der-head. There’s no way it-ll go that smoothly,” chided the owl.

“Oh, shut it, you.”

“It was a mi-stake to bring Charlotte back with you. What’s the point if she can’t cast ma-gic?”

“Well, the point is...” Gilbert began before he broke off. “Look, see here. Having Charlotte forces Miss Claire to stay in Lupty, so she’s useful in that sense, no? We have to keep Miss Claire here until spring’s over.”

“You know Prince Vik will ne-ver se-ttle for that.”

“Not if it’s Miss Claire’s idea to stay. And I don’t care a whit what happens so long as we get the good ending.”

“Dun-der-head. You’ll ne-ver reach the good en-ding.” Pooh flapped his wings above the shelf opposite Gilbert.

“Curse you,” said Gilbert. “You’re no support at all! Whose idea of a joke was it to make *you* the mascot character?”

Still, Gilbert sighed in relief. Not once had the protagonist shown up in his life before. It hadn’t occurred to him until his second life how beyond strange it was to be reincarnated into a dating sim without a protagonist. If a game-breaking bug took out the main character, then that was the end of all his hope, Gilbert thought. Yet he soon grew to personally love the land in which he lived and could not stomach its cruel fate. This time, he would prevent Lupty from meeting its doom.

He locked the journal, shut it inside his desk, and made up his mind. “I’ve finally found the protagonist and brought her here,” he said. “This time around, I must lift the curse on my kingdom or else.”

“You’re a dun-der-head,” Pooh opined.

“Would you shut it already?”

Chapter 16

Claire sighed and rolled over in bed when she saw the light of the next morning streaming through a crack in her curtains. She was in a royal palace guest room surrounded by unfamiliar furniture.

The door leading off to the living room opened, and Lui called, "Claire, are you awake?"

"Yes, more or less," she answered.

"You look as if you haven't slept a wink."

"And you look perfectly well rested."

"That I am," said Lui. "I'm quite used to this sort of thing, and I'd hate to crash in a moment of emergency."

Having finished dressing long before, Lui had come to assist Claire with her toilette, or so Claire supposed. *Lui's right*, she told herself. *I didn't come all this way for nothing*. Claire felt cheered in the presence of Lui and her constant composure. Their trip to Lupty was for one of Claire's many finishing lessons; it was not their goal to find Charlotte and send her back to Noston. *I will send Charlotte home as well*, Claire thought, *but I must also do my due diligence and follow the agenda. Besides, experimenting with how to purify the magical tornado is of far greater importance than Charlotte*.

Claire could not help but worry over Charlotte and her shameless behavior, but so long as Gilbert kept her sister under his wing, there was nothing Claire could do about it on her own. First, she must focus on what she could handle, she decided.

She steeled herself and changed into a gown for the tea party. As her fiancé, Vik had gifted her a selection of dresses to be worn during her stay. A vast number of garments hung in her closet, ranging from breezy frocks perfect for an afternoon tea party to stately and mature numbers fit for a ball. *Vik seemed awfully worried*, Claire mused, *when he picked out these dresses from the*

tailors. Despite his regret for being jealous over Gilbert, Vik's displeasure over being unable to accompany her to Lupty was evident to the last. Claire's intuition had been correct, she supposed—granted, not to the extent that she had predicted finding Charlotte here, but surely no one could have guessed that.

She produced the pocket watch she'd surreptitiously borrowed from Vik and listened to its hands marking time. The orderly sound soothed her. *Yes, I'll be all right*, she told herself. *I just need to keep my wits about me.*

She finished tying the ribbon on her dress and asked Lui, "Has there been any reply to the letter you sent Vik?"

"Not yet. Given the circumstances, I imagine he'll need to confer with the king before he can send you a response. He might even be speaking with Noston as well."

Yesterday, Lui had sent letters to both the kingdom of Paffuto and to the ducal family of the Martinos. From her response to Claire's question, Claire gathered it would still take longer to receive a response from either. *Even if anything else happens, I should just wait for Vik to reply*, she told herself.

Precisely after she'd finished dressing and eating breakfast, there was a knock at Claire's chamber door. Lui went to see who it was and came back leading Gilbert into the living area.

"Miss Claire, might I ask how fares your first morning here?" he said.

"Perfectly well, thanks to Your Highness." She smiled for formality's sake. She lacked the courage to say "wretchedly." Still, Lui seemed so tense that Claire hoped Gilbert would pick up on what she truly meant.

However, her cue sailed completely over Gilbert's head. "Why, I've decided to join you at today's tea party, Miss Claire. I do look forward to spending some quality time with you."

She hesitated for a moment. "With you, Your Highness? But the plans were for me to call on the hospitality of the young ladies of several prominent houses in your kingdom."

"I heard there is to be space at the table and thought I absolutely *must* get to

know you better. Now, I really ought to be going, but I shall see you again this afternoon. I simply cannot wait.”

“And might I ask about Charlotte?” Claire said. “I understand that she cannot use any magic, but it’d be a terrible thing indeed if she were to run away again.”

“Yes, indeed. I’ve placed a magical tool on her to track her whereabouts. Knowing her, I daresay she is relaxing in her rooms in the palace at present.”

If that were the case, Claire thought it best that she be handed over posthaste, as she communicated to Gilbert with a frown. He smiled at her, no warmth in his expression whatsoever, and continued. “The end of spring is just around the corner, miss. We may not be friends, but we both share the responsibility of the future of our kingdoms, which are, as I might remind you, on amicable terms. Do let’s try to form a proper relationship as quickly as we can.”

Claire started. He had avoided the issue in a manner that made little sense to her, but nevertheless it appeared to her that he had no intention of complying with her wishes.

Having said his part, Gilbert cheerfully made to leave when a white object slipped from his person.

“Excuse me,” Claire called, meaning to stop him, but Gilbert paid her no heed and promptly vanished. “What is that?” she asked herself.

On the floor lay a folded sheet of paper. Claire picked it up and opened it. Based on appearances, it was unmistakably a note; if it contained anything important, she figured she had best chase Gilbert down to return it at once. The paper was of an irregular shape, as if it had been ripped from a journal, and it said a very curious thing:

When you first meet her in the tea party cutscene, Claire will ask your favorite kind of tea. Answer “fruit tea” to increase her affection for you.

“I’ll ask his favorite kind of tea?” Claire repeated aloud, baffled. “And answering ‘fruit tea’ will increase my affection for someone?”

Lui stood next to her and peered at the paper with curiosity. "What is this?" she asked.

"Something Prince Gilbert dropped," Claire explained. "I doubt he noticed."

"Huh. Looks like part of a list of conversation topics to bring up with you, I guess. I'll send this to Vik as well, just to be on the safe side."

"Ah, right. I suppose it could be." Claire faltered. She felt bad for Gilbert, but as this visit was turning into a baffling and unimaginable trip in every way, she supposed they should err on the side of caution. She trusted that Vik would waste no time in doing something about this, but thought she had still best record every interaction and exchange while she was here.

Just after she passed the note to Lui, a realization hit her. *A cutscene. And this whole business about increasing my affection for him. Is he talking about one of those dialogue options I saw in the other world?*

She turned in a panic, but Lui was already gone.

The tea party followed lunch, with goodies served on a cake stand placed atop the round table in the garden. Every aspect of the decor radiated color and charm, evoking a feeling of a different sort of culture than both Noston and Paffuto. Indeed, the desserts looked almost as if they had been created with an emphasis on appearance in mind.

A number of young ladies sat primly at the table, smiling at the teacups painted with detailed designs in their hands. Claire and Gilbert sat in the center of the ring. She had guessed once Gilbert delivered her the news this morning that she might wind up next to him, but it disappointed her all the same. *I came to this tea party in the hopes of furthering a relationship with all these young ladies from the influential houses in Lupty, she thought. But now see what happens when Prince Gilbert is here.* Social events with other young ladies served as important information-gathering opportunities in any noblewoman's life. Claire had hoped that she might also be able to craft connections on this visit which would serve her well in the future. She sighed.

At this rate, we might as well say this tea party is for Prince Gilbert, she thought. All the ladies in attendance hung on his every word, and Claire

couldn't do a thing about the fact that her original goal had been utterly shoved to the side. Yet if Gilbert was to be here, she wished Charlotte could have attended as well. She couldn't commit any mischief without her magic, but Claire was still dogged by the concern that Charlotte might slip through her fingers.

While Claire was preoccupied with concern over her sister and disappointment about her thwarted goal, Gilbert, at any rate, addressed her quite cheerfully. "The tea we are having today is especially popular with the Lupty elite," he informed her.

Claire took a moment to respond. "It has a lovely aroma."

"That it does. These tea leaves were picked in southern Lupty, you know, and they add fruity fragrances."

"My, and how delicious they are. I would love to bring some home with me as a souvenir."

"In Lupty, we take our tea with our signature maple syrup. Do you enjoy your tea that way, Miss Claire?"

"I like maple syrup," she said, "but I'm afraid I'm not in the habit of adding it to my tea. I might have to try it someday."

Her answer was about as much as one could have reasonably expected, but for some reason, the conversation refused to move away from tea. Just as Claire was beginning to find it odd, Gilbert paused and, his patience having worn thin, asked, "Miss Claire, do you not have any questions for me? I'll gladly answer anything you would like."

"If you say so, then I suppose." Claire hesitated. "I would love to hear any memories you might have of Prince Vik."

"Ah, no," Gilbert said. "I didn't mean in that sense."

Well, then what sense are you talking about? she thought, puzzled. In that case, what should she ask him? It would be a breach of etiquette to talk politics in a place like this, and she was loath to discuss poetry anthologies, the latest feminine fashions, or anything else of that sort with Gilbert. They had already exhausted all conversation regarding the baked refreshments, and above all

else, they had talked of nothing but tea for ages now. Even the other ladies present must have been thoroughly done with the topic, Claire surmised. That meant only one thing.

“Then might I ask everyone to tell me about your respective land holdings?” she asked.

“How about we talk tea?” Gilbert suggested.

He couldn’t seriously be recommending they become sucked back into a tea conversation at this point, surely. Claire blinked, shocked, as behind her Lui failed to suppress a snort of laughter.

Just then, it hit her. *Come to think of it, there was that note I picked up this morning*, she recalled. *What was it again? Oh yes—Claire will ask your favorite kind of tea.*

At that very moment, Gilbert remarked with more gusto than was strictly necessary, “You know, of all the types of black tea out there, I am most fond of fruit teas.” Then he broke off and suddenly yelped, “Oh no!”

Claire looked at him. “Whatever is the matter?” He froze in place and paled. *What happened?* she wondered.

A beautiful white owl swooped down before her baffled eyes, the one who had introduced himself to her yesterday as Pooh.

Pooh sighed deeply, in a very un-owl-like manner, and grumbled, “You’re a dun-der-head, Gilbert. You gave her the an-swer all by your-self.”

Claire reacted in alarm. *So he did*, she thought. *That must have been a dialogue option.*

She didn’t know why it should be, exactly, but she felt sure that this was a so-called Claire cutscene from Gilbert’s perspective. In other words, she was in the middle of a dating sim route, but from the contents of Gilbert’s conversation, she gathered that the game was not following the script.

I suppose he must have grown tired of waiting for me to ask about his tea preferences and supplied the information himself, Claire mused. But that only raised an even more troubling question: Why was Gilbert trying to reach an

ending on this route? *I have a feeling it must be connected to the matter of him bringing Charlotte to Lupty.*

As Claire's worry grew, the owl on Gilbert's shoulder sniffed the tea and trilled, "You're a pro-per dun-der-head, that's what you are. Had you brought me a-long to the ga-la, none of this would have e-ver happened."

"Hush," Gilbert told the bird.

Claire realized that none of the other girls had heard the owl talk before, as there soon followed a chorus of shrill voices crying, "How cute!" and, "Ooh, say something else!"

As no one paid any mind to Gilbert's sulky admonishment, Pooh became the center of attention at the tea party.

That evening, after the especially exhausting tea party had come to an end, Claire and Lui set out for a walk. The days were growing noticeably longer at this time of year when spring gave way to summer. As the two strolled through the grounds of the royal palace, Claire would have liked to compare notes over what was to be done regarding Gilbert and Charlotte...but alas, they soon came upon the ultimate obstacle to achieving that objective.

"Prince Gilbert," Claire said. "Whatever brings you here?"

"I was just wondering if you might like to join me for a walk," said Gilbert.

"Walking is all well and good," Lui said, standing in between the two in order to guard Claire. She frowned in suspicion at the prince's companion. "But since when has going for a walk involved *that*?"

Gilbert failed to take the hint and smiled at Claire. "You like animals, don't you? We can ride together, and I'll show you around the grounds."

"I like animals," Claire said, her face stiff, "but surely riding together is out of the question."

There, directly in front of her, sat Gilbert atop a horse, looking every inch the prince. The steed, too, was no less than a perfect princely white. White horses were uncommon and often prized for their appearances. Claire had not heard

of them being used much for riding, so she asked with curiosity, “Is your mount always a white horse? What a rare surprise.”

“Oh, not usually,” Gilbert said. “This is just for the look of things.”

“The look of things?” Claire repeated.

“Well, he’s very cutscene-esque, don’t you think? And I do happen to know that the stroll through the garden cutscene takes place with a white horse.”

What in heaven’s name is he going on about? Claire wondered. She gathered that he wanted to continue from where he’d left off with their afternoon tea party and bring about some sort of cutscene. Furthermore, Gilbert only had the one horse with him. From the manner of his invitation, Claire gleaned that he wanted the two to share the steed; however, Claire and Gilbert absolutely could not ride together. It simply wasn’t done for a man and a woman to share a horse if they were not engaged to be married.

“Why don’t we set off in this fashion, and I’ll show you around the royal gardens?” Gilbert asked.

“No, I’m afraid I cannot join you,” Claire said.

“But this garden has a rich history of preserving Luptian tradition for a great many years. We insist that all visitors from Paffuto simply must come see it.”

Claire fell silent. That he kept hounding her even after she turned him down in no uncertain terms flummoxed her. *If he is this insistent, I can’t just refuse him,* she thought. *But still...*

Hence how she ended up here.

“My, it has been so long since we’ve ridden together, Lui,” Claire remarked.

“Yes, we often take carriages instead, don’t we?”

Claire clung to Lui’s back. The black-bay horse they’d borrowed from the stables was a decidedly good-natured creature and quite gentle; it had allowed Lui and Claire to ride despite having never met either of the girls before.

Claire sighed as they trotted through the sunset-dappled forest. Even though she’d been roped into coming here by Gilbert’s overbearing invitation, the

verdant wood still delighted her spirits.

“I never noticed yesterday that there was such a lovely forest out behind the castle,” Claire said.

“Neither did I. I have to say, I expect Vik would have been nigh on apoplectic if you and Prince Gilbert had shared a horse.”

“Vik, apoplectic? I can’t begin to imagine.”

“That’s because he always makes sure to behave himself in front of you.”

Claire giggled. Now that Lui mentioned it, Vik had been jealous when she’d decided to visit Lupty. She had the feeling that Lui’s idea was not overly exaggerated, which made Claire smile and blush. Her thoughts turned to Vik after having not seen him for several days. *Vik said he makes frequent visits to Lupty, she recalled. He must have walked this very same path himself. If I imagine it... Oh, but now I wish we could have come here together.*

She lingered in her sweet, sentimental feelings for a few moments before a scream from Gilbert snapped her back to reality.

“Help, help!” he shrieked.

Claire was alarmed. She looked over to see the white horse tearing by at top speed, Gilbert clinging to its neck. He seemed to have lost control of it somehow. The animal was in total panic, doing everything in its power to shake Gilbert loose. This was an inconceivable blunder for a member of the monarchy, whose education should have covered such things as swordsmanship and the equestrian arts.

“What in the world?” Lui said, visibly appalled.

Claire beseeched her for help. “How horrid! Lui, we must do something.”

“I don’t want to help him out, truthfully.”

“Believe me, I couldn’t agree more, but we really can’t leave him to his fate.”

Lui hesitated. “I suppose not. I’m sure he must have his own wards, but it doesn’t hurt to play it safe.” She sighed and chanted a spell.

The horse flung Gilbert off, but a cushion of winds caught him mere moments

before he collided with a tree. The gusts lightly deposited him on the ground, whereupon he sank into a weak heap on the spot.

Claire slid off her horse and dashed over to him. "Are you hurt, Prince Gilbert?"

"No, but..." He faltered. "It doesn't make any sense. I've never heard of a white horse turning wild before."

"Never mind about that. Let us just be grateful that you are safe."

Lui came over, leading her own horse. "I'm glad you are unharmed," she said. "It would have been a horrible nuisance if we had to bring you back injured."

"Oh my," Claire said, noticing a smidgen of mud on Lui's face. "Lui, you have a bit of dirt on you."

Lui tried rubbing it off with her fingertip, but no matter how she tried, the grime refused to go. "It might be from when that horse was running alongside us earlier," she said. "It was moving at such a brisk clip that it kicked up mud."

"Here, then. I'll wipe it off for you."

"My thanks."

Claire pulled out her handkerchief and wiped Lui's face. This time, she touched but lightly, and yet the dirt came off with no trouble. Relieved, Claire made to put the handkerchief away when she heard a scream.



Claire turned to the source of the commotion. Sure enough, it was Gilbert, looking white as a sheet.

“Is something the matter?” she asked. “Are you injured after all?”

“No,” he said, “I’m not hurt. It’s just...” Gilbert trailed off. “You were supposed to wipe *my* face after a romantic rendezvous on horseback in the gardens.”

Claire fell silent, and Lui shot her a bewildered look. However, his explanation made sense to Claire. No doubt Gilbert had wanted to tug Claire onto the same horse for a romantic evening stroll, culminating in her wiping his cheek with her handkerchief and her affection for him rising.

This is the real reason he proposed going on a walk, she realized. In the world Claire inhabited, Gilbert stood no chance of winning her heart, even with dialogue options and cutscenes; such was only natural for a world that had gone off the rails of its storyline. However, it seemed to Claire that Gilbert understood the way their route should be played, down to the correct choice to select for each question. Still, that made no difference—attempting to force these cutscenes to happen made for some quite odd circumstances all the same.

Just what is Prince Gilbert’s goal here? Claire wondered, suddenly nervous.

Above her head, Pooh, who was keeping an eye on the proceedings from a nearby tree, loudly and calmly scolded Gilbert. “You dun-der-head. You don’t stand a chance.”



Meanwhile, as twilight fell over the gates of the Royal Academy of Paffuto, Vik called Lydia’s name to stop her in the midst of the line of carriages ready to take their charges home.

“Why, Your Highness,” Lydia said. “I take it Lady Claire has arrived safe and sound at the palace in Lupty?”

“Yes, she used a portal several days ago to teleport to the nearest village. I expect I’ll receive reports from both Lui and Prince Gilbert sometime today.”

“Oh? Well, I do hope she’s had a safe trip. Lady Claire is far from home in quite the unique social position, and I am sure it must be quite nerve-racking for her.”

Vik hesitated before admitting, “Yes, I suppose it must be.”

He understood Lydia’s concern painfully well. No matter how wise and clever Claire was, no matter how well-laid their plans, that never ruled out the possibility of the unexpected. Furthermore, unlike Vik, Claire lacked the right to single-handedly deal with any situation that arose, which only added to his worries. Thus he had sent along Lui; not only did she possess sharp wits, but Claire trusted her intimately as well. But naturally, as Paffuto and Lupty shared a strong, long-lasting friendship, it was rare for any sort of trouble to occur. *Yet I’m afraid something might happen because I’ve sent Claire off alone*, Vik said to himself.

He promised to inform Lydia if he received word from Claire and then returned to the palace to find Keith waiting for him with a stern expression.

“Vik,” Keith said, “His Majesty has asked for you at once.”

Vik had an unsettling notion of what this could mean. He felt his own expression hardening as well. “Give me a brief summary.”

“My understanding is that Miss Claire has run into something we could never have foreseen. She’s found Charlotte and reports that, for some reason, the girl is under Prince Gilbert’s protection.”

Vik started. “I’ll go at once.” Curbing the will to act rashly, he hastened down the marble corridors. He did not so much as stop to change out of his school uniform before entering the audience chamber. “I’ve arrived,” he called.

“Vik?” The king gave his son a meaningful smile when he saw him all in a lather. As aggravating as that was, Vik understood what it meant and felt relieved that this must not be a dire situation.

“I hear my fiancée, Claire, has encountered difficulty on her trip to Lupty.”

“Indeed. Read the letters before you do anything else.”

An official standing at the ready proffered two letters, one from Lui and the other from Gilbert. Vik devoured Lui's letter first and frowned.

"Gilbert has clear designs in bringing Charlotte back from Noston, she writes. And he refused to hand Charlotte over?"

"Correct," said the king. "Yet he does not seem to know that Charlotte Martino cannot cast magic. If he were to learn that her white magic was rendered ineffective, I daresay Prince Gilbert would back down."

If you say "back down," Vik mused, *that suggests we're treating this as a conflict.* A chill crept up his spine.

Yet the king appeared to feign ignorance of that as he continued. "You had best read the other letter as well. You'll find it quite taxing, no doubt."

Vik paused. "All right."

The other letter his father mentioned was Gilbert's, and Vik had not the slightest idea what about it could be taxing; still, he resolved to read it anyway.

"I propose we extend Miss Claire Martino's stay," Vik read aloud. "Whether she should stay permanently will depend on the wishes of the lady. I plan to have her answer before spring's end."

His voice shook, although he knew it was from anger and not from being taxed. He crushed the letter in his hands, wrinkling the paper.

"Vik." The king's voice echoed loudly across the audience chamber's red-carpeted marble floor. "Has Prince Gilbert always possessed such a lack of good judgment?"

It took Vik a moment to respond. "I daresay not. Although I didn't see much of him during my stay last year, I never had that impression of him. If anything, I always thought he was quite levelheaded, the sort of fellow you can never get the upper hand of."

"As did I. Yet now he brings home criminals from other kingdoms and treats his allies with insolence. I never thought he would be one to commit such shortsighted actions. This is all too absurd, hence why it taxes me so. Don't you feel the same?"

Vik paused to think. "Something must be afoot."

The king was most likely feigning nonchalance, but no matter what pains Vik took to think rationally, he could not curb his anger.

"Your Highness, I can look after that," Keith offered, concerned.

He made to take the letters from Vik, but Vik turned him down. "No need." At any rate, he abhorred the man who had written that letter, Vik decided.

"I wished to consult with you on whether we can solve this amicably or not," the king said. "We chose to keep quiet about the uproar Charlotte Martino caused, and as a result, Noston cannot demand her to be extradited as a criminal."

"We cannot interfere in the domestic affairs of other kingdoms," Vik said. "Indeed, I agree. We can make no formal objection."

Vik and Asbert had arranged the graduation gala scheme together, and once they'd trapped Charlotte there, Vik had deferred the matter of dealing with the girl to the kingdom of Noston. *We spoke of sentencing her to life at the abbey during my engagement banquet not long past*, Vik recalled. *But her flight to Lupty changes everything.*

"Let me put the question to you," the king said. "We have two plans we could follow. First, we could demand they release Miss Claire and Charlotte Martino by way of Noston, but this would be time-consuming. Alternatively, you could go in the guise of her fiancé and escort them home."

Vik started.

"What say you?" asked the king. "Our relationship with Lupty is long and amiable. There is also the matter of Miss Claire's personal safety to consider. And here," he added after a pause, "I daresay there may be some issue with which your presence could help."

Vik raised his head as he wrestled with his anger and looked the king square in the eyes. The king wore a composed smile much like Vik's own. He detested the way his father treated him like such a child, but perhaps, he reasoned, his father would never have proposed such a plan otherwise.

“Yes, I will go retrieve Claire,” he said. “And if Prince Gilbert is in any sort of trouble, I will lend him my assistance.”

“Good. Do just that. And now you may depart with all haste.”

Vik fell silent. It made him grimace that his father could tell how he yearned to run and retrieve Claire at once.

Yet now that he knew he could go and bring her home, he finally felt like he could relax. Slightly calmer now, he dropped his gaze and noticed a curious slip of paper sandwiched in between the pages of Lui’s letter. *What’s this?* he wondered.

He drew the paper out smoothly. He’d thought it was a scrap of some sort, but it appeared to be a sheet torn out of a journal. Given that Lui had attached it as evidence, he figured that it must contain something important, so he unfolded the paper and read its odd contents.

““When you first meet her in the tea party cutscene, Claire will ask your favorite kind of tea. Answer “fruit tea” to increase her affection for you.”” Vik paused. “Your Majesty, might I ask what this is?”

“A worthy question. I saw it as well but could not make head or tail of it. Do you suppose it’s some sort of code?”

Vik hesitated. “No, I don’t think that’s it.”

Both prince and king finally lowered their hackles as genuine bewilderment filled their eyes.

Chapter 17

As the third day of Claire's stay in Lupty dawned, she rose in her guest room and dressed herself alone, as was now typical for her. Her maid Sophie habitually assisted her in such proceedings, but Claire could handle all of her daily needs on her own. As the finishing touch on her preparations, she tucked the pocket watch hanging about her neck into her gown such that it was hidden from view.

I'm nervous, she thought, but this will be a good luck charm. A charm to protect my heart, and more valuable by far than my wards. She still looked uneasy when she saw herself in the mirror, so she slapped herself on both cheeks.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. No doubt it would be Lui, Claire thought, as she opened it.

"Good morning, Claire," said Lui. "I'm glad to see you're already dressed."

Lui's appearance gave Claire pause. "Did something happen?" she asked. It was only morning, but Lui already appeared exhausted.

Before she could reply, Gilbert popped out from behind Lui. "Hello, Miss Claire. How do you fare today?"

She took a moment to answer. "Not too poorly, thank you." And there, she realized, was the cause of Lui's exhaustion.

Claire felt like she'd already had her fill of this exchange as well. Yet Gilbert did not notice her exasperation and beamed. "I was hoping to give back the handkerchief I borrowed from you yesterday."

"I beg your pardon? I haven't lent you any handkerchiefs."

"Come now, I mean the handkerchief you used to wipe my face. It was filthy by the time you were done, so I had it washed and brought it with me."

Claire could not respond. She looked back and forth between Gilbert's face

and the white handkerchief that he proffered like it was the most natural thing in the world. She could not make head nor tail of it. To begin with, she had wiped Lui's face yesterday—not Gilbert's!—and furthermore, Gilbert had been covered in mud from head to toe once he'd been flung from his horse. Forget wiping a little dirt from his face!

Is he trying to twist the facts because the cutscene was a bust? she wondered. If he was, that was horribly sly of him. But as this thought crossed her mind, the difference between his all-too-childish tactics and the look of pride on his face made Claire inadvertently crack a smirk.

"Ah, I see I've finally made you smile," Gilbert said.

"Oh no. It's only that your actions are much too difficult for me to comprehend," she said.

But Gilbert seemed to believe that his tactic had been a success and refused to let Claire's comment stop him. He informed her, "And now that I've returned the handkerchief you lent me, I daresay we may have gotten even closer. You know, there's to be a hunting tournament tomorrow, and I would love to have you join me."

Claire started in alarm. First and foremost, she hadn't lent him any handkerchief, nor had he returned one to her, and they weren't any closer at all. She was at a loss about which point to object to first, but then an uncommon phrase caught her attention. *A hunting tournament?* she wondered.

"My sincerest apologies," said Lui, "but I'm afraid a tournament was not included in Miss Claire's itinerary. And the good lady is not accustomed to dealing with eccentric princes, so I would greatly appreciate it if you could kindly avoid any further offers, Your Highness."

Despite Lui interposing herself in the conversation, Gilbert's single-minded expression never wavered. She especially wanted the prince to understand her second sentence, but it had all sailed over his head.

Gilbert cheerfully announced, "Our hunting tournaments here in Lupty are quite special. Since you've come all this way, we thought we'd best entertain you and thus threw one together at the last minute."

In Noston and Paffuto, tournaments wherein one could put their hunting chops to the test were now a thing of the past, but Claire knew this tradition lived on with great vigor in Lupty. She also remembered a scrap of knowledge from her finishing lessons. *Yes, if I recall correctly, the thing about Luptian hunting tournaments...*

But before she could ask Gilbert, he told her with pride, “The winner is granted a celebratory kiss from the goddess. As our honored guest from a neighboring land, you would make the perfect goddess. You will do us the honor, won’t you?”

“I’m afraid I must decline,” Claire said. “Considering the history of this tournament, I fear I would make a poor goddess.”

Gilbert reacted in shock. “I-Is that a no?” His eyes widened in disbelief.

Claire sighed. “Your Highness, I came here as Prince Vik of Paffuto’s fiancée. Please, no more of these jokes.”

“Well, no matter,” Gilbert said. “I’m sure you’ll have changed your tune by the time the tournament’s over. Even if I don’t use Miss Charlotte to detain you, no doubt you’ll eventually rethink staying here in Lupty. It’s simply that momentous of an event.”

Claire took a moment to collect herself. “At any rate, I cannot accept this handkerchief, as it isn’t mine.”

Gilbert’s manner of speech had almost made it sound like he was declaring that he would forbid her from leaving. It made Claire uneasy. *Not again, she thought. He’s trying to lead me down a route I know nothing about, even if he must force cutscenes to get there. I shudder to think how this will turn out.*

After Gilbert exited like a whirlwind, Claire put her head in her hands. “There’s so much to be concerned about,” she groaned. “To start with, the Lupty hunting tournament was of old a means by which to choose a princess consort. Those with a claim to the throne would compete in hunting ability, and whoever brought down the largest game animal could propose marriage to whichever young lady he might fancy.”

“You know so much about this,” said Lui. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

“Yes, I do know much and more. Furthermore, the young lady who received the proposal would not be allowed to refuse. Of course, I doubt any woman would refuse a marriage proposal from a man in the royal family, but all the same...” Claire trailed off. “I learned that this is an especially hard rule for this particular tournament. They will accept no reasons for refusal. Any who dares will have no peace for as long as they live in Lupty.”

Lui made no response to that, and Claire paused speaking as well. An uncomfortable silence followed. It would’ve been far too much of a stretch for Claire to suggest that Gilbert’s invitation had nothing to do with the history of this event. *He must be aware of the custom surrounding the tournament, she thought. And he did say he was throwing this together last minute, didn’t he? Had we prior notice, Vik would never have permitted me to come to Lupty alone for fear I might be crowned goddess.*

She did not know what schemes Gilbert was hatching. Even though the rationale behind his illogical arguments and actions was so riddled with holes she found it amusing, she trembled at the thought that she could not foresee what lay ahead of her.

In order that she might calm herself and leave these other feelings behind, Claire changed the topic to something less harrowing. “Say, Lui, has there been any word from Paffuto?” she inquired.

“My apologies. I should have told you before Gilbert started spouting all that drivel. I have a letter from His Majesty the King which reports that Vik is on his way here to pick you up. He has already left and will arrive in two days’ time.”

Claire paused. “Vik is?” Her eyes opened wide, and she froze in place.

Lui nodded gently. “That’s correct. It says he is coming at once. I gather that he couldn’t help but worry after all. Of course, you’re not the one he finds concerning; it’s all Gilbert’s doing.”

“How pitiful of me,” Claire said. “After all I did to persuade Vik to let me come alone despite his worries, now I need him to come rescue me from Prince Gilbert, just as he predicted.”

The only things he hadn't foreseen were Charlotte's presence and Prince Gilbert offering her asylum. Claire's heart sank as she thought about how she was powerless to rectify the situation on her own.

"Claire," Lui said, in a stroke of sisterly kindness, "you'll be able to see Vik in just two days. I know this dunderhead of a prince may be making you anxious, but all you need to do is hang tight until Vik's arrival."

Claire giggled. "Well, you know, I *do* enjoy it when it's only you and me as well."

Lui conceded. "As do I. What a shame Vik is on his way."

"Yes, isn't it?"

She and Lui grinned at one another. Claire felt the pocket watch around her neck, a weight that had only moments ago burdened her so, lighten as they joked together.



"Claire won't be coming home until later?" Isabella asked anxiously. She lifted her gaze from the problem set at hand.

Evening fell across the salon in the Reine mansion and the desk that had been temporarily moved there to serve as the base of operations for Isabella and Dion over the past several days. A maid stood by at the end of the room, ready to leap into action should their throats grow parched.

Dion smiled as kindly as he could. "Don't worry," he said. "She may be returning later than we planned, but Vik is expressly going to Lupty to bring her home. I'm sure she'll make it back with no trouble at all."

"His Highness is going himself! Oh, I see. I apologize for asking such an irrelevant question in the middle of our lesson."

"Oh, not at all. I was the one who brought up Claire's plans to begin with," said Dion. "Now, Miss Isabella, why don't you try this next problem?"

"Will do!"

Ever since Claire's departure a few days prior, Dion had begun calling on the Reines in her place—naturally, to serve as a standin tutor. He planned to focus

mainly on desk work during Claire's absence, as he could not teach Isabella anything about dancing, ladies' manners, or anything else of the sort.

Dion found Isabella to be an excellent student and a wonderful child overall. He never observed her speaking willfully; he could not begin to imagine her immodest request in his first life, which had led to Claire and Vik's fortuitous encounter at the ball. It furthermore startled him how indiscriminately kind the Baron and Baroness Reine were. While Claire and Isabella were always sequestered away in Isabella's room during their lessons, Dion would wait outside, whereupon the lord and lady of the house would take him into the salon and ply him with hot cups of tea. No matter how he declined, they urged him to come chat with them, and he always found himself joining them in the salon. Yet he highly doubted they were truly looking for a conversation partner for themselves. Dion felt bashful and restless with their affection, but he by no means disliked it.

"All right, what say we wrap up around there for the day?" Baron Reine called cheerfully through the open salon doors.

The baroness also looked in on Dion and Isabella together and giggled teasingly. "No, darling, not now. Can't you see how hard Isabella is working? I'd so hate to disrupt her."

"But hasn't she been at her lessons for two hours already? I never notice the time when she and Claire work in her room." The baron paused. "Don't you think she's being a little too studious? Is it all right for her to sit at her desk for so long?"

"From my understanding, this is perfectly normal for young aristocratic ladies looking to enroll in the Royal Academy. We merely aren't used to it yet."

"Really, now? Those girls must have it hard." The baron chuckled.

Isabella blushed slightly as she glanced at her parents laughing together and paying no mind to the fact that she and Dion were in the midst of their lesson. "I do apologize, Dion," she said, tripping over her words. "My parents are such chatterboxes, as you can see, but I do love them even for all that."

"Oh, I completely understand," said Dion. "Your parents are delightful."

Isabella lit up at those words.

The dusk outside had given way to full darkness. Dion closed the textbook to signal the end of their lesson, and the baron spoke up almost as if he'd been waiting for them to conclude. "Why, you've wrapped up for the day, now have you? What do you think about joining us for dinner this evening?"

"I'm enormously grateful for the offer, but I'm afraid it's in my contract that I'm to go home as soon as I've finished my duties as Isabella's standin tutor."

"Oh? But we have a raspberry tart with peach mousse for dessert tonight."

Dion started. The baron grinned like a mischievous child as he glanced over to see how Dion might react. Once freed by Claire from the spell of House Mead, Dion had developed quite the sweet tooth. He knew that he must refuse, but the invitation was too tempting to resist. He found himself wavering despite himself.

As if aware of how Dion felt, Baron Reine expounded on the desserts. "We'll have guests tomorrow, so the kitchens are baking a smorgasbord of confections tonight. If only we had a kind soul to help us taste test them all."

Dion hesitated before admitting, "I would be glad to help. I wouldn't miss it for the world, really." They had the better of him today. But surely there was no harm in joining them for such a little thing as dinner.

Isabella beamed in delight as Dion caved in the face of the desserts. "Wonderful!" she said. "I'll help with the arrangements."

"Oh?" said her mother. "Hadn't you better get changed first? This'll be a very important dinner, after all."

Isabella jumped. "Oh, yes, mother!" She dashed up the stairs to her room with glee.

Watching her resonated with Dion. All the hospitality associated with a dinner for guests, going as far as to dress up in one's best—it'd been so long since he had run in circles that practiced such etiquette.

Dinner was ready before long, and the Reines invited Dion to their main

dining room. The table was a solid, majestic affair, unthinkable for the likes of new money. All the paintings on the walls were famous pieces; furthermore, Dion assumed they were the original works of art. Those and the many other seemingly antique furnishings surprised him slightly, but he held his tongue.

The baron and baroness noticed his expression. "It's hardly common to see such old, stuffy dining rooms nowadays, I should think. I fear it's rather out of fashion," said the baron.

"Very much so," said his wife. "We inherited all of it. But the things *are* nice, and they do have a history. It'd be such a shame to get rid of them. This dining room is our favorite part of the house."

Dion smiled gently. "I love this particular style. Something about it reminds me of home."

"I'm so glad to hear that," said Baroness Reine. "Tonight is all about you. You're the man of the hour."

The baron and baroness smiled at him, and he took his seat bashfully.

After the soup and the hors d'oeuvres, they served a course of roast beef. To Dion's surprise, the chef was not responsible for carving the enormous joint of meat; Baron Reine was evidently to play this role.

"I take it you're fond of cooking?" Dion asked.

Baron Reine smirked. "Well you see, this allows us to crowd around the table and have fun together. No? Mealtimes are for delightful conversation."

Dion's eyes widened. He had never heard such a thing before. But all his dining companions and even the servants were having a grand time, laughing and chatting with one another. What a rare wonder of a household. For Dion, who'd grown up in a strict environment, the Reines' home was filled with nothing but unbelievable things. The sheer warmth and comfort was inconceivable to him.

Not long ago, Dion knew, he would likely have hesitated before joining their company. He would have been loath to intrude on such a happy family, not when he was responsible for such crimes. But spending time with Claire and their other friends had changed Dion. Having someone accept him for who he

was healed his mental scars. Truly, Dion felt that the warmth and happiness of the Reine family was a lovely thing indeed.

“I’ll be serving dessert tonight, Dion,” Isabella said. “If there’s anything you’d like, do please tell me.”

She looked delighted as she wheeled in a cart, the likes of which a maid might push. On top of it sat a three-tiered cake stand heaped with baked goods: canelés, macarons, financiers, kouign-amanns smelling of caramel and butter, raspberry tarts, and peach mousse.

“Could I have one of each?” he asked.

“Absolutely!”

As he watched his daughter serve the dessert, Barone Reine looked as happy as could be. “We do so love having guests. Ever since you and Claire started coming, we’ve been hoping to someday have a nice, relaxing dinner with you both.”

“No, father,” Isabella said. “Today is special. If we invited Claire to eat with us, we would only give Prince Vik cause to worry.”

Her concern reminded Dion of how Isabella had once invited Claire to tea after lessons but grown anxious about Claire leaving on time.

“You are quite a supporter of their relationship,” Dion remarked.

“I just think they are so meant for each other. I...” Isabella trailed off. “I would truly love to be Claire’s lady-in-waiting someday.” She blushed as she spoke.

Baroness Reine chuckled softly. “Claire and Prince Vik are the reason she’s worked so hard at her studies these past few months.”

“M-Mother, that was a secret!”

“Oh, was it? I’m sorry.”

Dion looked on in curious silence, puzzled by the significant nature of their conversation. He’d heard that Isabella had been the one in Claire’s previous life to strong-arm Claire into accompanying her to Vik’s ball. He could tell that Isabella revered the couple just as much this time around, but what did that have to do with studying? It made little sense to him. Yet whether he

understood or not, his sole concern was to act as a replacement tutor to the best of his ability in Claire's absence.

"This kouign-amann is just scrumptious," he said. "It's a shame that I am the only guest here to enjoy it. We must have Claire next time too."

The Reines' eyes widened, and then the baroness said, "We adore Claire too, but you're a dear guest to us all by yourself."

"I couldn't agree more," added her husband. "It's such fun, like I've gained another child." He paused to amend his words. "Like I've gained a son."

"Oh, a son! Yes, it really is like that! Dion, if you ever want to become one of ours, just say the word." The baroness laughed.

Isabella reddened once more at her mother's gaiety and bowed diffidently. "Oh, do stop, mother and father! I'm so sorry, Dion."

"No, not at all. This is nice." He paused and then repeated, "Yes, it's nice. It's really very fun." And he meant it, well and truly.



Dion thought back to his childhood, to the days in which he was to be the next head of the household and was prevented from eating his beloved sweet treats. As he sat amid this bliss—the desserts arranged in a charming fashion on his plate, the affectionate Reines—he wondered, *Was this what healed Claire when she was driven from Noston in her first life? Was it this warmth?*



Despite her firm refusal to be the goddess, Claire ended up a spectator of the tournament all the same. Lui, clad in her hunting clothes, apologized. “I’m sorry, Claire. I tried to refuse, but that proved hard once they mentioned the king’s involvement. I’m sure you can imagine.”

“It’s quite all right,” Claire said. “Besides, I came here to learn more about Lupty, so I suppose I should be attending this event anyway.”

She had come to understand that this event was held by order of the king, not Gilbert. That made her feel all the more uneasy, and it was now even harder to put her foot down. Thus, she donned an athletic dress, boarded a carriage, and rode out into the woods behind the palace. *I will be fine*, she told herself. *After all, Vik is coming tomorrow to pick me up.*

She would have preferred to settle this on her own, but that proved difficult in light of the diplomacy concerns. All she could do was gather as much information about the current state of affairs as possible and wait for her escort without causing a fuss.

When she arrived at the mouth of the woods, she found numerous pavilions, tables, and chairs that looked quite at odds with the forest background. She assumed it was a place for her and other nonparticipants to relax, as evidenced by the presence of the king and a group of aristocrats. For such a spur-of-the-moment event, this was quite an elaborate affair.

No sooner had Claire been led to one of the pavilions to await the beginning of the tournament when, right on cue, Gilbert poked his nose in. “I don’t suppose you’ve changed your mind about being the goddess?” he asked.

She jolted. “Your Highness! If you continue to insist, then I must withdraw from spectating this event.”

“Oh no, you mustn’t, you mustn’t! Let’s just forget I ever asked.”

The way he dithered about her refusal made Claire wonder if he was up for the task of being a prince.

As she exchanged glances with a disgusted Lui, she glimpsed a shock of pink frills outside the entrance to the pavilion. Said frills belonged to Charlotte, whom Claire had not seen since the day of her arrival. She was relieved that Charlotte hadn’t run off somewhere, but Claire also noticed that her sister seemed to have no interest in her whatsoever. Charlotte had eyes only for Gilbert.

“Aha! There you are!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“What brings you here, Miss Charlotte?” Gilbert asked.

“I heard there’s to be a special tournament today, so I had a guard bring me!” She pointed to a fed-up-looking guard. Given Charlotte’s usual behavior, Claire figured she must have repeatedly demanded her way in order to get here and refused to take no as an answer.

Gilbert proved as much by pressing a finger to his temples and muttering, “Miss Charlotte is quite the free spirit. Nor does she ever take the hint. I was an utter fool for thinking, even for a moment, that I could use her.”

In a display of perfect timing, Pooh loudly chastised from where he waited outside the pavilion, “You’re a dun-der-head, Gilbert. An im-be-cile!”

Charlotte heard none of that and carried on merrily. “I guess being a prince makes it easy to put on such fun events, huh? Prince Asbert never did anything like that, so this is a dream come true!”

“Well, I suppose,” Gilbert said. “Should I be so inclined, I can enjoy events of this sort however often I please.” For an answer supposed to be directed at Charlotte, he seemed to be looking at Claire awfully hard.

She ignored him, paying him no response save a sigh. *Looking back on it*, she thought, *Asbert also threw every party imaginable for Charlotte, no matter how we tried to stop him*. Granted, such episodes had occurred in Claire’s first life, wherein Asbert had been under Charlotte’s white magic brainwashing spell. Gilbert and Asbert: both acted like fools, and both were too superficial to be the

princes of their respective kingdoms, if Claire was any judge. It was almost like someone was controlling them. Charlotte had manipulated Asbert, yet no such person existed for Gilbert. *But if not, then what has made him so irrational?* Claire wondered.

As she mulled the matter over, Gilbert exited the pavilion with Charlotte in tow. Lui lowered the tent flap once she'd confirmed that both were gone. Then, she cautiously whispered, "Claire, I hadn't noticed earlier, but what Prince Gilbert said is true. Charlotte does indeed have a magical tool on her that lets others detect her location. I would bet it's of the type that cannot be removed, and I judge that she hasn't noticed it herself."

"That's why Gilbert is letting Charlotte run about, doing whatever she pleases," Claire said.

"Yes, that's my assumption as well. Partially because, as one can imagine, it would be a disaster were she to run off after he spirited her here. And it does seem that his goal is to detain you here in Lupty until spring comes to an end. I daresay it would spell no end of trouble for him should he lose Charlotte as a pawn."

"No doubt about it, Prince Gilbert is not acting normal."

"Well, let us never mind about that. Have you noticed it yet?"

"Pardon?" Claire asked, puzzled. "Noticed what?"

Lui's voice grew even more tense. "This pavilion is decorated more lavishly than all the others. The interior as well. All the furniture is of a different design."

"Now that you mention it, I see you're right." As she agreed, Claire thought back to what she'd noticed before walking in. All the pavilions were luxurious enough for the nobility to feel right at home, but she had felt that this particular pavilion was visibly cut from a different cloth. *If they've laid it out for me because I am an honored guest from Paffuto, then I would be most grateful,* Claire thought. *But judging from Gilbert's odd behavior, I am positive that it can't be anything so simple.*

When she looked up, she saw that Lui seemed to be thinking the exact same

thing.

“It makes me think this is a place outfitted for a special figure in the hunting tournament,” said Lui.

“Indeed. It would make a perfect pavilion for the goddess.” It occurred to her that Gilbert was trying to wear her down and make her be the goddess anyway. She sighed.

Yet Lui only responded breezily, “Yes. But still, just because the goddess grants her blessing to the tournament’s winner, doesn’t mean that Gilbert has to win.”

This gave Claire pause. “What are you suggesting?” she asked, blinking.

Lui said nothing but merely smiled with confidence.

When Claire lifted the tent flap following her conversation with Lui, she heard Charlotte’s voice. It sounded to her like Charlotte was talking with the other noble girls.

“I am Charlotte Martino, if it pleases you. The daughter of Duke Martino of Noston,” she said, introducing herself.

“The Martinos?” said another girl. “Would that be the family with the strong affinity for magic?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Why, how incredible! You come from a superb family line. And I see you and Prince Gilbert are on most familiar terms as well. Are you by chance a candidate for his hand?”

“You’re not far off the mark,” Charlotte boasted. “I’m only here because Prince Gilbert asked me to come all the way back to his kingdom with him, you know.”

“My, my!”

Claire saw the other girls’ demeanors shift as they acknowledged Charlotte’s achievement, whereupon each began greeting Charlotte by turns. Thus, Charlotte would soon come to be known as Prince Gilbert’s fiancée, Claire

expected. *She hasn't said anything definite, but that changes nothing, she thought. It's just like her that she can make everyone think the wrong thing with nothing but a few frivolous remarks.*

As Claire scrunched up her face in disgust, more of the conversation floated over to her. "You know, I was just thinking how odd it was for there to be no goddess in this tournament, but perhaps Lady Charlotte will fill the role," said one girl.

"Maybe His Highness plans to propose here and now!" another gushed.

Befuddled, Charlotte spoke up loudly among the other suddenly animated girls. "A goddess?" she asked. "What's that?"

"Oh, I suppose you wouldn't know, being from Noston as you are. In our hunting tournaments, one person plays the role of goddess to give the winner her blessings," a girl explained.

"That's right," another chimed in. "Of old, this tournament was held for those of the royal family to formally court a lady. Thus, I believe Prince Gilbert must be keeping with tradition in going out of his way to host a tournament. It's much too last-minute otherwise!"

"How lovely!" exclaimed a third.

Claire realized these girls were imagining the prince wooing this pretty, young duchess-to-be from a foreign kingdom. Their excited squeals carried all across the pavilions.

Once understanding dawned, Charlotte seemed not altogether displeased. "What a romantic form of courtship," she said. "Wait, but this event was held in my favor! Oh, Prince Gilbert is so wonderful! He couldn't be any more different from Prince Asbert in Noston."

Claire did not know what to think. She couldn't help but feel pity for her old childhood friend, first for having his hands full with Charlotte, and now to be lambasted even in another kingdom. Furthermore, Asbert was the heir to Noston's throne. Claire almost left her pavilion to correct Charlotte's statement, unable to stomach letting such unfavorable criticism of her homeland spread, but Lui caught her by the shoulder.

“Don’t stop me, Lui,” she said.

“No, don’t worry. I’ll go.” So saying, Lui left the pavilion in Claire’s stead. She wore a smile that looked much like Vik’s whenever he was plotting something.

“Miss Charlotte,” Lui said, “since that’s the case, you must have this pavilion.”

“Huh?” Charlotte said.

“The pavilion in which Lady Claire and I are residing is decorated more opulently than any of the others. I am sure Prince Gilbert has made it up for the goddess. We weren’t aware, you see, and I fear we’ve done you a horrible discourtesy.”

Claire started. Now she guessed what Lui was doing. This was their chance to cede the pavilion to someone else for a justifiable reason. She couldn’t slip out on her own volition, not when Gilbert had assigned it to her. But with word of Charlotte’s betrothal to Gilbert in the air, surely no one would object.

Naturally, Charlotte readily agreed with delight. “True! I hadn’t noticed when I poked my head in earlier, but that pavilion *is* the odd one out. It’s enormous, and it has such soft couches. Plus, there’s goodies to eat! I’ll take it.”

“Please, be my guest.”

As Lui made way for them with her usual smile, Charlotte and the crowd of girls swarmed into the pavilion that Lui and Claire had just occupied.

The latter two settled into an empty pavilion. *I’m free*, Claire thought, *thanks to Charlotte*. She sighed in relief as she sat down in a simpler chair.

Lui gave her a teasing grin. “We can correct their rude words about Prince Asbert once Vik arrives. It’ll be faster to show them that we can be trusted, as opposed to playing a game of he said, she said about the rumors now.”

“What would I do without you?” Claire paused. “Thanks, Lui.”

“Think nothing of it. You know Vik will blow his lid tomorrow when he finds out that special pavilion was for you.”

Claire giggled. The two looked at one another and shared a laugh.

The tournament began shortly thereafter. The tent flaps faced the woods so that the spectators could watch the show, but Claire soon learned that custom dictated stepping out of the tents to see off the participants.

Lui stood next to her on the starting line and promptly informed her, “The rules state that whoever brings down the largest piece of game within the hour is the winner. Only magic and swords may be used. Simple, no?”

“So it would seem. I wish you the best of luck, Lui.”

“Thanks.”

Gilbert blanched when he heard them conversing. “H-How come the knight of your guard is participating in the tournament?” he stuttered.

“Why, Your Highness, I was under the impression that nobles from far and wide are invited to participate in the tournament in order to demonstrate the excellency of the monarchy. Do you mean to say that you would refuse, when you hold tradition so dear?” Claire asked.

Gilbert fell speechless.

Just moments ago, after she had seen off Charlotte and Gilbert, Lui had told Claire of a special tactic. It was designed, in the unlikely event that she was asked to serve as the goddess, to let her evade the issue while raising as little fuss as possible. And the tactic went as such...



“You’re going to participate in the tournament?” Claire repeated. “Are you sure?”

“I am,” said Lui. “You see, we still hunt in my earldom of Clarke. I’ve hunted with my father and brother since childhood, so I see no issue now. I rather think you can trust in my abilities, if I do say so myself.”

The tactic that Lui had told Claire once Charlotte and Gilbert had exited the pavilion was that Lui herself would join the tournament. As a knight and a member of Vik’s guard, Lui carried herself easily. She was also brilliant and possessed fine athletic ability. No matter what she did, be it entering a tournament last-minute or anything else, Claire thought that surely there was

nothing Lui couldn't do. Lui was above average in everything, Claire knew, but still her eyes widened when she found that Lui was even a skilled huntress.

It took her a moment before she could stutter out, "Why, I see."

"I imagine that there is some plot for the prince to win, but I refuse to let that happen. I'll give him a sound drubbing, so don't you worry, now."

The confidence with which she spoke made Claire wonder all over again what she would do without Lui. *This means that if on the off chance they force me to be the goddess, Lui will win and nothing will happen*, Claire told herself. It was a perfect last resort, one that would have had Lui's fangirls back in Paffuto turning red and swooning.



Claire came out of her reverie and sized up Gilbert's appearance as he stood in front of her. The tables had turned on he who'd forced the tournament to be held, and now Gilbert was white as a sheet, his lips quivering. He looked to Claire as if he did not have so much as a retort for her. (Incidentally, she did not hear Pooh disparaging him either.)

Lui mentioned earlier that they might have rigged the tournament for him, she thought, *and it looks as if she was right. After all, a new, sudden challenger shouldn't be cause for him to shiver so much.*

"B-B-But," he stuttered, "you don't stand a chance. People don't hunt in P-Paffuto anymore, do they? You may be a fantastic knight, but that doesn't mean you'll do well in a hunting tournament."

"Oh, were you not aware?" Lui answered smoothly. "Actually, we do hunt in one part of Paffuto. Coincidentally, that just so happens to be the part where I was born and raised."

Gilbert once more jumped and made an expression of despair. He was an easy man to read.

While this went on, a bang resounded to announce the start of the tournament. Lui spurred her horse, ignoring Gilbert's flimsy call of, "Hey, wait!" In no time at all, she had shrunk to a tiny dot. Muttering to himself all the while, Gilbert chased after her as, simultaneously, several dozen young noblemen

trotted into the woods on horseback. They all seemed to be stealing glances at Gilbert to see what he was doing; most likely because the tournament was indeed rigged, Claire decided.

A flight of birds, startled by the sudden noise in the forest, took to the air with a rustling of wings. Claire was unable to conceal a vague sense of apprehension when she saw them. *Will it be all right?* she wondered. *I do hope that nothing bad happens.* The overcast sky threatened to turn to pouring rain at any moment.

Now that the tournament had begun, Claire's hands were tied. As the contestants were permitted access to the entire forest behind the palace, she could not make out what was happening no matter how far her tent flap was able to open up. *Lui said she would be all right, so I should have nothing to worry about,* she reminded herself. Yet even so, that thought calmed her but little, for she had no idea what Gilbert was thinking.

To begin with, even if he did not know of Charlotte's villainy, it was beyond strange that he had decided on a whim to take home with him a citizen of an allied kingdom. Furthermore, Claire thought he would have been so disappointed to learn Charlotte couldn't do magic that he'd be quick to give her back, but now she was his bargaining chip to keep Claire in Lupty. And yet if his aims on Claire were related to her magic, as had been the case for Charlotte, he'd shown a surprising lack of interest in that. Nor did he seem to particularly care that Claire's magical color was superior to Charlotte's. Instead, he kept trying to reenact those odd scenarios and force Claire onto his route. None of it made any sense, especially when she remembered how the mere sight of herself casting a ward had made his eyes glitter.

And I'm curious as to why he says I must stay until spring is over, she thought. Claire had her own incident to be concerned about at spring's end: the danger that had threatened the world in her first life. "The magical tornado." The moment those words passed her lips, she felt the drawer of memories in the back of her mind open a crack.

Magical tornadoes were formed from the gradual accumulation of magical debris created every time a spell was cast. The omen of one alone was enough

to terrify the world over. They formed with periodic regularity every few decades or so, but even then, it was nigh on impossible to predict one in advance. To make matters worse, the tornado that Claire knew would arise at the end of spring was unlike any seen before in all of history, hence why she planned to face the crisis fully prepared. That was half of the reason for her visit to Lupty.

Now that I think on it, Claire pondered, on one of my trips to the other world, that friend of mine who kept playing this game said the oddest thing. "There's this bit where a huge tornado forms. But the main character's magic works! She puts up a big shield, barely anyone gets hurt, and they have this big ball to celebrate. And then you get popularity points with the prince!"

Ah right, she thought. The magical tornado is a major plot point in the game's spin-off storyline too. But recalling this incident from another world begged a question. In the spin-off, she doesn't purify it. She puts up a barrier that only covers Paffuto, and the tornado ricochets off of it. Which raises the question: What happened to the other kingdoms?

The world Claire lived in was an entirely separate beast from both the main game and its spin-off. Therefore, she presumed that this was not something she expressly needed to worry about, but once it had inadvertently occurred to her, she couldn't manage to shake the thought.



Now deep in the woods, Gilbert scanned the area around him. If he were to win this competition, he would need to go after big game only; it gave him no satisfaction to harm a smaller animal for nothing. Furthermore, Gilbert had a plan to bag a big catch without wasting his magic or sword skills.

"Let's see, now," he said. "It should be around here somewhere."

"You're such a chea-ter. You set this up," said a voice over his head.

Gilbert yelped. He looked up to see Pooh perched in a tree, looking at him. Gilbert sighed and slid off his horse. "Don't scare me. I thought someone found me."

"If you're em-bar-assed to be found do-ing what you're do-ing, I'd daresay

you shouldn't do it at all."

"Hush. This is more efficient, and besides, what other choice do I have? Anyone would do the same were they in my shoes."

"Chea-ting is chea-ting. I hope you fall off your horse."

Gilbert jumped. "Today I have my faithful steed Brian. He's a very good horse, and he would never throw me off."

"So much for the fair-y-tale prince on his white horse."

Gilbert took a moment to respond. "Are you sure you're really a mascot character? You're too scathing by half!"

As Pooh hooted abuse at him, Gilbert slowly walked his horse until a small shed came into view. *There it is*, he thought to himself as his steps quickened.

"I take it you already caught the large animal and put it in the shed," Gilbert explained.

"In-deed. I lured it in with food and then drugged it with sleeping powder."

"And I suppose that means you didn't harm so much as a hair on its head?" said Gilbert. "You're the best, Pooh."

Gilbert had instructed Pooh earlier to see about catching a large animal for him that would allow him to win the competition. The animal had been thus procured and kept in the shed. Gilbert had also implied to the other participants that this competition was for his own benefit. This meant that everyone should read the writing on the wall and either fail to catch a thing or else bring back only a small bird or some such at most. Still, it was best to be prudent, hence why Gilbert had enacted such an underhanded tactic.

"I am not always a dunderhead," he said. "I can get the job done when I put my mind to it, you know."

"*You* were not the one get-ting the job done."

"Yes, yes, whatever you say. I'm very grateful for all your help here, but not for anything else, mind you."

In the Lupty hunting tournament, harming an animal as little as possible

proved one's mastery. As he tied up his horse behind the shed, Gilbert felt a wave of admiration for Pooh—he really was a superb mascot after all, Gilbert decided—for preparing an animal without harming it whatsoever.

However, his normally docile steed—Brian—flicked his ears back and stamped his forelegs. Gilbert noticed how wary he looked but paid it little mind, assuming only that Brian was unnerved by the unfamiliar surroundings.

Gilbert opened the shed door without a care on his mind. The creature Pooh had caught for him, he figured, would probably be roughly the size of a large deer. Perhaps it was a wolf. If so, it would earn him high praise even if it turned out to be on the smaller side for a wolf. Although, he would prefer a larger wolf, were one to be had. His own level of ability made no matter, as the creature would be drugged with sleeping medications. He had nothing to fear—

Yet the moment he opened the door, the rank stench of an unfamiliar animal assaulted his nose, forcing him to look up. Gilbert, so nonchalant he'd been on the verge of humming a little tune to himself, froze.

There before him lay a great black animal, twice as tall as he was, with deep red eyes and sharp claws. A low growl issued from its mouth, which sported a set of ferocious fangs. Yet worst of all was that this gigantic monster was not asleep at all. It was up and *moving*.

“Wha...” Gilbert spluttered. “What is this...?”

The moment he began to speak, his perspective shifted for some inexplicable reason. What had been a casual glance upwards now made him feel as if he were traveling up and up to see the top of the creature, far above him.

He was aware of himself edging backwards and beginning to panic, when Pooh lectured him proudly, “This is a Black Shuck. Just the thing you need.”

“Wha...?”

“I guess the sleeping powder wore off since it's so big.”

Gilbert whimpered.

Magic existed in Gilbert's world. Only a chosen subset of the aristocracy could use it, and the animal kingdom likewise had its own hierarchy. Among them,

some animals possessed a biological variation that imbued them with a tiny amount of magical power: the so-called fiends. Fiends showed themselves to humans but rarely, and when one was seen, the knighthood of the respective kingdom it had been spotted in would be dispatched to exterminate it. As far as Gilbert was aware, no fiend sightings had been reported for the past several years.

He stopped thinking. The words, *This isn't in the script. First of all, they never showed any hunting in the Gilbert route at all. It just suddenly cut to a CG of the protagonist and Gilbert*, echoed in a corner of his mind. He could not begin to wrap his head around the current situation, but he was undeniably in a great deal of trouble. Yet in spite of how he thought to flee, his body refused to listen. He wanted to immediately turn tail and run, but his legs felt too weak. He just barely managed to shuffle backwards, still too shocked to stand properly upright.

"Are you all right, Gilbert?" Pooh asked.

"How... Gh," Gilbert gulped. He wanted to scream at Pooh, who was evidently enjoying himself, "How could I possibly be all right?" but he was quite naturally too tongue-tied for words.

According to Pooh, this particular fiend was known as a Black Shuck. By appearances alone, it was no more than an enormous wolf, but even Gilbert, who wasn't especially well versed in magic, could tell that it oozed intense magical power. That meant it was tough. Furthermore, Gilbert had never encountered a fiend before, nor did he know how to catch one. It was the sort of beast that only a skilled knight who knew every spell in the book should face. And above all else, even if he did manage to capture it, he had no way of dragging the titanic Shuck back to the base camp. Perhaps his life would end here, before the kingdom's fated doom even arrived.

Now that he came to think on it, he seemed to recall that the game's packaging included the line, "Featuring a bombastic mascot, who wouldn't know what moderation meant if it hit him!" Could it be?

But it was past time for that memory to be of any help. Right before Gilbert's eyes, the Black Shuck, displeased at having been woken, appeared to choose

him for its target. Gilbert could not move when fixed with that piercing glare. Everything seemed to be so far away, even Pooh's nonchalant comment of, "Aren't you going to beat it?"

Gilbert was, most assuredly, doomed.



"Your tea, Lady Claire," said the serving girl as she brought a cup to the pavilion where Claire had set up camp to relax.

"Thank you," Claire said. She smiled at the girl, who responded with an elegant smile of her own.

Claire was the pavilion's sole occupant. Lui should have been there as her guard and attendant, but she was off participating in the tournament, and all the other girls had left with Charlotte to occupy the goddess's pavilion.

This maid was quite a capable one, Claire realized, for as she had been preparing the tea, she had also been considering the matter of finding Claire a conversation partner. "Lady Claire, I do hope this tournament isn't boring you. I'm afraid most of the hunting isn't visible from here."

"Not at all," Claire said. "Even if I can't see it, I am still enjoying the festivities. Besides, this is a great opportunity for me to study Luptian culture."

The maid paused. "Is that so?"

She looked slightly disappointed, which made Claire tilt her head in confusion. She had tried to set the maid's fears to rest by indicating her lack of boredom, but that must not have been the reaction the girl wanted.

"Do you perchance know of anyone else who's grown tired of the tournament?" Claire asked tentatively.

The maid's eyes lit up. "Were you so inclined, I would be most pleased to introduce you to a conversation partner."

"Yes, by all means," Claire answered willingly.

The maid's elegant smile vanished with a visible sense of relief, whereupon a man peeped in around the open tent flap as if he had been waiting for this signal. He was a middle-aged gentleman with a full face of wrinkles, a noble

department, and a smile befitting the occasion. Yet as amiable as he seemed, he also gave off quite the daunting impression.

Claire's eyes opened wide at her very unexpected visitor. *I know who he is!* she thought. For there before her stood the very same man whom she had met upon arrival just a few days prior: the King of Lupty.

"I was hoping we could have a little chat, Miss Claire Martino," said the king. "Might I join you for tea?"

"Y-Yes, but of course," she said.

She began to apologize for not greeting him earlier, but as she rose to do so, he stopped her with a gentle hand. The king gave her a teasing grin. "I'd prefer to keep my visit here a secret from Gilbert. I thought that if I came now, I could be certain to talk to you without his presence. I apologize that we've invited you to an event you're unfamiliar with, and during such a short stay as well."

"No, I've had a wonderful time."

Claire had nodded when she'd heard the word "secret." The maid must also have inferred it was to be a private meeting, Claire realized. The minute she had served two portions of tea and refreshments, she'd announced she would wait outside if they needed her for anything and stepped out. That left Claire alone with the king and a bundle of nerves.

I've come to Lupty as Vik's fiancée, she thought, but I'm not a member of the royal family myself. That means my travel plans didn't include a proper face-to-face meeting with the king.

Paffuto and Lupty had long-standing close connections; this allowed them to be on friendly enough terms that the realm's successors and other important persons could come and go to learn about one another's cultures. This also meant that Claire could not afford to make a blunder. She clenched her fingers where they rested atop her knees.

However, she would never have expected the conversation to take the turn it now did. The king hesitated for a moment before asking, "Miss Claire, how much have you and Gilbert talked?"

"His Highness and I? I beg your pardon, but, erm. I'm afraid not much." They

had spent a fair amount of time together, at least in Claire's book, but she and Gilbert had said little and less of substance to one another. All they spoke of was Charlotte, or else Claire had rebutted Gilbert's cryptic invitations.

"Ah, I see," said the king. "In that case, you must not have any idea what that boy is going on about either."

He smiled ruefully, having gleaned the truth from the slightly bewildered look on Claire's face. Since he'd called Gilbert "that boy," Claire figured the king must have come to talk to her as a father, as opposed to a monarch. *Where in heaven's name is this conversation going?* she wondered.

The king laughed gently as Claire grew more baffled by the moment. "Miss Claire, what are your thoughts on Gilbert? How does he measure up in your eyes as a member of the royal family of Lupty?"

Claire bit her tongue. That question was all too difficult to answer. She knew she must choose her words with care, but at the same time, she had precious few good impressions of the prince. Still, the king did not appear to be waiting on tenterhooks for her answer. She deemed that this, too, was him asking only as a relative. *I think His Majesty wants to know my true opinion,* she told herself.

Encouraged by the kindly look he gave her, she began falteringly, "His Highness is... Well, in all honesty, I am not sure what to make of him. Prince Vik of Paffuto described him to me as a wonderfully brilliant gentleman. However..."

What she left unsaid was that he often acted in ways that were inscrutable to her and showed little prudence. Not only had he whisked away a girl from an allied kingdom, but he refused to send her home once he learned she was a criminal. No matter how one tried to frame it, Gilbert was not fit to be a ruler. Yet Claire certainly could not say that.

As she puzzled over how to word this, the king snorted with laughter. "Now I see why Prince Vik chose to make you his fiancée. I was just thinking how my hands would be tied if you paid me cheap compliments about Gilbert. In truth, many people praise him all too much, but I don't think a one of them is fit to be trusted with the good of the kingdom."

Claire blinked at how readily he confessed that he was testing her. She realized that he, too, was aware of how ill-suited Gilbert was to his role as prince.

“Would you mind if I ask you something?” Claire said.

The king’s already amiable expression mellowed even further. “Go right ahead. You know, Gilbert was brilliant as a boy, ever since he was small. He was magnificent in everything he did, be it horsemanship, swordplay, or academics. Your Prince Vik was his contemporary and esteemed just as highly. With those two reigning at the same time, I thought, we were sure to have an age of even greater peace and prosperity.”

Claire struggled to speak for a moment before managing, “Oh.” Vik lived up to his reputation, but if she were to be honest with herself, the news about Gilbert did nothing but confuse her.

The king smiled ruefully once more at Claire’s bemused response and then narrowed his eyes. “That all changed five years ago, you see, when Gilbert fell from atop a great staircase and hit his head. He has never been the same since.”

“How so?” Claire asked.

“He suffered an enormous accident. He did just barely manage to survive, but he seemed like a completely different person after his head injury. Before, my son had a seriousness to his personality you’d not expect to see in one of his age, and now...and now, well, you and I both know how he is.”

Claire said nothing. She knew what he was alluding to. From the way the king sighed as he spoke, she could only guess how traumatic that had surely been for the man.

“You must have been surprised by how suddenly we hosted this tournament,” the king said. “He begged me so desperately that I gave him my approval against my better judgment. Gilbert may not have what it takes to be royalty, but in the end, I still want to look after him. You could find no other who cares more deeply about the kingdom than he.”

“From the way he acts and the things he says, I can tell he doesn’t have any

particularly bad intentions,” Claire said. “It’s just that his desire to help his people is making him desperate.”

“I put on this tournament to set Gilbert’s mind at ease. The minute it is over, I will see to it that you do not have to stay here in Lupty. I will also send your sister, Miss Charlotte, back to Noston with all haste. So I must ask that you give my son the pleasure of your company for just a little longer.”

“Very well, Your Majesty.”

The king’s sincere apology took Claire aback. While she understood that the king thought Gilbert ill fit to rule following his head injury, she also sensed a coincident deep love from him.

When Prince Gilbert hit his head five years ago, she thought, something must have happened to his mind. Claire pictured the glassed-in room in her head, the one in which she became a different person, who hung out with friends and played video games. Claire had already grasped that Gilbert was someone from this other world, but now she was curious about this business of five years prior. As she had first seen the other world the night she fled from the Royal Aristocratic Academy, perhaps Gilbert had seen something of his own five years ago. *Could that be related to his bewildering behavior: why he keeps trying to force these cutscenes to happen and why he offered Charlotte asylum?* she wondered. She could only guess, but she felt she was not far off the mark.

While she pondered, the king told her, “I understand you are taking finishing lessons in order to learn to be the Queen of Paffuto, no? I suppose you might understand the meaning of our hunting tournament, then.”

“I do,” Claire said. “It is an old tradition to choose one’s bride.”

“Indeed it is. I have no doubt Prince Vik will be furious when he learns Gilbert tried to have you take on the role of the goddess.”

Claire fell silent. She tried to entertain the thought. Lui had said Vik would go ballistic, but she’d only been talking about how two friends on good terms interacted. Surely he would remain calm and behave appropriately when it was a matter of diplomacy, Claire thought.

“I think not,” she finally said. “He understands well the position he is in.”

“Oh? Well then, I am quite envious; he and Gilbert are practically of an age. Ever since Gilbert’s change, I’ve enjoyed conversing with Prince Vik. Of course, I still care for Gilbert dearly. It’s only that I remember how he used to be. He and Prince Vik were once so alike.”

Claire was not sure how to respond to the king and his sentimentality.

Yet once he finished speaking, the king rose and said, “Thank you. I shall take my leave.”

When he reached the tent flap where the maid stood waiting, the king gave Claire a smile pregnant with meaning. “Once again, I do want to most sincerely apologize for my son. I’ve sent the word out, you know.”

What word? Claire wondered. The minute she had noticed how odd Gilbert’s demands were, she’d sent word of her own to Paffuto and Noston, and Vik was supposed to be arriving tomorrow to bring her home. But what the king said made no sense to her. However, he only smiled meaningfully and departed.

Did the king come all this way merely to ask what I think of Gilbert? she wondered. *No, that wouldn’t make sense.*

She heard excited voices, Charlotte’s foremost among them, in the goddess’s tent some distance away. Truthfully, she wanted nothing more than to take Charlotte and leave Lupty at once. But when she accounted for her status as Vik’s fiancée, she knew she could not act on her own. At the very least, she had to be patient until Vik arrived upon the morrow.

As she listened to the girls chatter, she grew fed up that all she could do was sit there. Just then, the object of Claire’s anger popped in.

“Claire, won’t you come join us?” Charlotte asked.

“Charlotte...” Claire trailed off.

Charlotte had her hair done up carefully and wore a frilly dress à la those she had favored back when she lived with the Martino family. Claire thought of her two elder brothers and their burden of shame in contrast to Charlotte and the lap of luxury she lived in. She fixed a silent stare on her younger sister.

“Charlotte, you committed an enormous crime in Noston,” Claire began. “And

then to run away on top of that? This will not be stood for. You will return to Noston with me before much longer, I promise you.”

“Wait, what?” Charlotte said. “No, I don’t want to. Come on—I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No?” Claire could not believe her ears, but alas, she realized she had not misheard.

Charlotte kept smiling the same charming grin. “Nope! I didn’t do anything wrong. I was just trying to get the handsomest guy for myself, that’s all. And besides, you know that everything in this world was made for me, right? The whole point of me using my white magic was to achieve my goals; it wasn’t like I was doing it to be mean or anything. So I didn’t do a single thing wrong. Nope, not one bit.”

So she claims, Claire thought. But I cannot fathom that in the slightest!

As Charlotte kept repeating that a lack of bad intentions equated to her actions being perfectly all right, Claire felt a headache coming on. Charlotte disguised herself as the cherubic baby of the Martino family, but she was nothing short of a monster, plain and simple. If it weren’t for her magic and the Martinos’ financial and social support, by rights she would never have been treated like a lady.

And were that true, then Claire could grab Charlotte, teleport them both back to Noston, and be done with it. She would take her to their family and see to it that Charlotte was punished accordingly. Yet diplomatic relations with Gilbert threw a wrench into that particular equation.

Claire seethed with silent anger, but Charlotte appeared to take not the slightest notice of it. “You know, I was just telling them all about you in that pavilion over there.”

“Me?” Claire asked.

“Yup! I told them that I’ve looked up to you like you were really my big sister ever since I was little, and now you’ve got a prince of a ginormous kingdom falling in love with you at first sight. They all went gaga when they heard. Everyone thinks it’s so cool how both us sisters will marry into royal families.”

Claire made no response.

“You and your buddies destroyed my magic, remember? But when I see how excited all the other girls are, I think to myself that no matter what happens, I guess I still have that special something. I’m always in the middle of such amazing, wonderful, dazzling things. They’re all there to glam up my life and set me apart, you know?”

As Charlotte prattled on dreamily, Claire was reminded all over again of the way she had felt on the night of the graduation gala. *I doubt that Charlotte will ever really feel sorry for what she’s done*, she thought.

The Martino family planned to send Charlotte to the abbey in the north as soon as she was found, a place which accepted convicts to rehabilitate them into society. But was that truly the best place for Charlotte, when she couldn’t tell the difference between right and wrong? Even if she could no longer use magic, would Charlotte ever admit to her wrongdoing and feel sorry when she still lived in a place that spoke the same language and provided for all her needs? *I’ll have to ask Oscar what he thinks about this*, Claire made a note to herself.

She sighed at Charlotte and her earnest, repeated vows that she had done no wrong.

Claire watched Charlotte leave and then exited the pavilion herself. She assumed that the hunting would soon be over; there were certainly a lot of people gathering around, an increasing number of finished participants among them.

Claire looked around, uneasy. *Lui has yet to return*, she noted. There was still a bit of time left on the clock, but virtually all of the contestants were back, and Lui was nowhere to be seen. Lui could handle anything, but what if some unimaginable catastrophe had occurred? Claire grew worried.

Someone remarked as well, “Prince Gilbert isn’t back. Has there been any word of him?”

That set the base camp abuzz.

“What?” someone said. “Is that true?”

“Who was guarding him?” someone else asked. “Did he send up any flares?”

“He said he would be fine with no more than that white owl of his, Pooh,” another person reported. “My understanding is that the other hunters lost sight of him partway through, and he only had the one flare on him as well. Prince Gilbert has not used much magic lately, so if the flare failed to go off, he would be in dire straits. He would have no way to tell us where he was.”

So Prince Gilbert isn't back either? Claire wondered. That must've meant that Lui wasn't the only one missing.

The atmosphere in the once-relaxed forest grew tense.

“Prince Gilbert is part of the monarchy,” someone said. “Surely he has a magic tool on him to broadcast his location.”

“Yes, but he left it here, heaven only knows why.”

“What would possess him to leave something so important?”

“Absurdity upon absurdity. Whatever happened to the wisdom His Highness showed as a child?”

“Come now, let's set out and look for him. We can't possibly hold the tournament without our prince.”

The situation was far graver than Claire had first thought, she realized. *I am sure I could teleport to wherever Lui is*, she said to herself. *Perhaps Prince Gilbert will be there too.*

Just as the idea crossed her mind, a column of light rose from somewhere deep inside the forest, so bright it could be seen in the light of day. Normal flares rose into the air and vanished, but this one continued to glow to broadcast its location. The sight of it made the entire assembly freeze for words.

“That's a magic flare,” someone finally managed.

“Prince Gilbert's?”

“I doubt it. Only a knight with a high magical color could cast such a spell.”

“Well, there’s no use arguing about it. Let us go investigate.”

Claire watched the knights prepare to depart out of the corner of her eye and thought to herself, *It must be Lui*. Lui would be at the base of that pillar of light, but with her abilities, it would’ve surely been a cakewalk to teleport back on her own. The fact that she hadn’t must have meant that she was in a situation where that proved impossible. *I imagine Prince Gilbert is with her*, Claire thought. *And something must have happened that is bad enough for her to call for help.*

As she reasoned this, the knights galloped out to the source of the light. Claire overheard a contestant who had just returned after the time limit say, “You know, I heard a bit ago that there’s been a Black Shuck prowling around.”

“Aren’t Black Shucks one of those fiends we learned about in school? One couldn’t possibly be in this forest, could it? You’re out of your mind.”

“But there is one, I swear. An elderly couple walking deep in the woods found a hut with a Black Shuck inside, I hear.”

“What?”

“And that hut was in the same direction as the flare that went up.”

Lui! Claire thought. Her clenched hands began to sweat. She knew about fiends too, and Black Shucks were among the strongest and fiercest of fiends. If Lui had run into one... Well, even the most excellent knights were not perfect, Claire knew. As unlikely as it was, disaster could strike. She trembled, the tips of her fingers turning to ice. *If I teleport there, then I can bring Lui back even if she is wounded*, Claire thought. *If I go now, we should be able to make a clean escape. All I need is to get her back to the castle; they have physicians and holy women there.*

She stood, her mind made up, whereupon she saw several figures advancing from deeper inside the forest, growing steadily larger as they approached. One was Lui. *Lui!* Claire cried out internally. She breathed a sigh of relief and ran over to her friend. Only then did she notice the other familiar faces behind her. At the head of the column rode a very weary Gilbert, his face white as milk and his posture so poor a knight had to support him with a hand. It was a horribly pathetic look for a prince to have.

Behind him came several knights who had gone to fetch Gilbert, followed by Lui, and then behind them all—what was *he* doing here?



“Vik?” Claire exclaimed.

There was no mistaking him. Vik was clad in a riding outfit he did not habitually wear, and the dappled sunlight made his blond hair shine. Claire reflected that she hadn’t seen him riding in this fashion in quite some time.

She was too caught off guard for her mind to keep up. If nothing else, wasn’t Vik supposed to come pick her up tomorrow?

While Claire stood stock-still and dumbfounded, the procession made its way back to the base camp. Gilbert remained lifeless as ever as he rode atop the lead horse. One of his guardsmen slapped his cheeks, but the prince showed no sign of rallying himself.

Meanwhile, Vik dismounted in front of Claire, who was still blinking in shock and too stunned for words. The stately, princely expression that he had worn just moments before softened into a smile. “Why, hello, Claire. Say, what do you make of Lupty?” he asked. “They are one of our crucial allies, you know. Has this been a fruitful venture?”

Claire said nothing for a moment. “Oh, Vik.” His easy, confident behavior filled her with relief. Truth be told, her venture had been less than fruitless thanks to Gilbert. Yet now she could feel the heat begin to return to her fingertips, which had frozen while she fretted over how Lui would take on the fiend. Just then, she felt all of her pent-up anxiety begin to dissolve. She was awash in heartfelt relief that her trusty, evenhanded prince had arrived. *But with that being said*, she thought, *what is he doing here?* Her brain was a sea of question marks.

Lui dismounted and then told Claire the whole story. “I heard Prince Gilbert screaming from deep in the woods, you see.”

“Screaming?” Claire repeated.

“Indeed. He had neither flares nor any magic with which to trace him, so by the time I found him, he was already in such a state.”

“Such a state” referred to how Gilbert could not even move and had to be held upright on horseback, Claire gathered. Yet even then, Gilbert must have had some pride left at stake, as he protested in the feeblest of voices, “Don’t tell her the rest.”

Annoyed, Vik gave him a glare and then made way as a wagon trundled up, carrying an enormous mound of shaggy black fur. Vik casually watched it go by, and then scowled with a sigh. “How come I have to bail out a prince who joins a hunting competition only to chicken out the moment he catches sight of his game?” he asked.

Just then, the air became thick with shrill screams; Claire guessed the girls in the pavilion had come out to see what was going on. Then, it finally hit her what the shaggy black thing must’ve been. *I’ve seen those in books myself*, she thought. *That is a fiend. A Black Shuck, as they spoke of earlier.*

The beast was dead but still made for a frightful sight. It was no wonder the girls were scared.

“You big weak-ling,” Pooh hooted as he alighted above Gilbert’s head.

Lui turned to him in disgust and snapped, “I must say, your prince is awfully lucky. He found a hut in the middle of the woods, opened the door, and just so happened to encounter the perfect beast for him to win the tournament? Ah, but it looks to me as if he lacked the strength to catch it himself. What a shame.”

“No,” Gilbert protested absurdly. “This fiend is mine. Yes, I did need to be rescued, but I was the one who found it. It’s *mine*.”

He wobbled on his feet even after he got off his horse, but a knight helped support his weight. He seemed as unsteady as a newborn fawn, making the noble ladies giggle. As Vik was nearby, he went to help Gilbert along with an expression that made it clear he thought he had no other choice in the matter.

“Prince Gilbert, you shouldn’t force yourself,” he said. “Have your guards take you to your chambers.”

“I refuse,” Gilbert said. “What are you doing here, anyway? I heard you’d arrive tomorrow at the earliest.”

“In addition to your request to prolong Claire’s stay, I had word from your father that you were holding a hunting tournament today. I came as soon as I heard, so surely I am right on schedule, no?”

“My father?” Gilbert repeated. He looked well and truly frustrated by Vik’s

unruffled reply. “The king? What are you talking about?”

Yet Vik did not so much as pause before continuing on the warpath. “You and I had no opportunity to spend time together during my last visit to Lupty, and I’m afraid we did little more than say our hellos when we met at the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy’s graduation gala. You seem quite different from how I remembered you. Might I ask what prompted this change of heart?”

“Ah. Um.”

“I recall Gilbert Héctor Legrange to be an extraordinarily capital fellow, not a shallow fool who would balk over a Black Shuck or attempt to detain the future crown princess of another kingdom.”

Gilbert made no response for a moment before stuttering out, “Anyway! This tournament is a monumental event here in Lupty, I’ll have you know. The goddess must grant the champion her blessing, or else the kingdom will fall upon dark times. I will not have you interfering.”

“So you mean to say—” Vik began, but just as his gaze turned sharp, a big hand clapped Gilbert on the shoulder.

“Why, Prince Vik. Just look at how noble you’ve grown since we’ve last seen you,” said the King of Lupty.

Gilbert looked away in shame and choked on his words. Vik paid him no mind, instead addressing the king in a manner befitting nobility. “Your Majesty, I regret that I have not paid you a visit sooner. It grieves me that we should meet in such a time and place as this.”

“Indeed. Heavens, a fiend,” remarked the king. “Why, I imagine that even in such a wide land as Paffuto, you see Black Shucks but rarely.”

“You’d be correct in that assumption,” Vik said. “Truth be told, it gave me a shock.”

The others watched, slack-jawed, as Vik and the king chatted companionably. It looked to Claire as if some of the young noblemen and knights on guard duty knew who Vik was, but it was only a matter of course that the ladies taking tea within the tent and some of the lesser nobility did not know the nobility of other kingdoms by sight. They looked at him with expressions that asked, “Who

is he?”

Lui ignored the tension and introduced her prince with a rare polite yet fake smile. “This is His Highness Prince Vik, the eldest Prince of Paffuto. He has come to take his fiancée, Claire Martino, home after Prince Gilbert has detained her here.”

The assembly was shocked. “The Crown Prince of Paffuto?” cried one.

“Prince Gilbert detained the future crown princess of such a great power?” exclaimed another. “Whatever could they mean by that?”

In no time at all, whispers broke out. Pooh swooped down from his perch in a tree to land upon Gilbert’s shoulder and delivered fluently, “You’re a dun-der-head, Gilbert. And this hunting tour-na-ment of yours was a flop.”

“No it wasn’t!” Gilbert snapped. “Anyway, the most important thing is that I made it back in one piece. Let’s get to the point already and have the awards ceremony now, shall we?”

“I would think the point of a hunting tour-na-ment would be the hunting,” said Pooh. “What-ev-er are *you* talking a-bout?”

“Hush, Pooh. This is the most important part.” Gilbert paused before continuing. “The winner of the Lupty hunting tournament receives the blessing of his goddess, you know. And there she stands.”

He addressed Claire reverently, making one of the ladies who had been taking tea in the tent with Charlotte tilt her head in confusion. “I beg your pardon,” she said, “but is the goddess not the Lady Charlotte Martino?”

“Huh?” said Gilbert.

“She told us ever so much, Your Highness. We have all been so concerned about your lack of an engagement, but that must have been due to your imminent betrothal to a lady from such a grand and talented house.”

“What? Pardon?” Gilbert’s mouth hung open, a sincerely foolish expression. The light in those beautiful blue eyes of his threatened to vanish at any moment. However, the noble girls had spent the entire tournament listening to Charlotte’s bragging and thus had already made up their minds about their

prince's engagement.

"We warmed up quite a bit to the object of your affections, Your Highness, during our conversations in the goddess's pavilion."

"She's such a lovely, dear, and cheerful person," chimed in another of the girls. "Why, I think she would be absolutely perfect for the way Your Highness is now."

"Oh, and where is Lady Charlotte?" yet another girl asked.

"Still dining on treats in the tent," said her friend. "Should we call for her?"

"Yes, let's. Your Highness, please accept my congratulations on your engagement."

Gilbert's eyes went blank as the girls spoke one after another. "What? How did this happen? No, you cannot be serious. You're joking, aren't you? I can't receive a blessing from someone who didn't stay in the goddess's pavilion during the hunt. Those are the rules as tradition demands. That's why I'm certain I led Miss Claire to that tent and did not tell her what was going on. So how did this happen?"

In the depths of his panic, Gilbert was unaware that he was saying rather more than he should have.

Judging that now was a good time, the king moved to intervene. "Gilbert, we are serious, and this is no joke. Miss Claire and I were conversing earlier, so you see, but not in the goddess's pavilion. My understanding is that Miss Charlotte has been refreshing herself in that splendid pavilion you had set up over there."

"Father!"

The king regally addressed his son, who was in the first forays of catastrophizing. "Gilbert, I am well aware that you changed five years ago. All the same, I operated under the impression that you loved our kingdom deeply. Yet ever since your return from the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy's graduation gala, you have seemed all the stranger. You may claim everything you do is for the good of the kingdom, but I cannot turn a blind eye to sheltering a criminal, no matter if you did not know of her transgressions. Do you have any explanation for yourself?"

“Father... Yes, but...”

“I have spoken with Paffuto about your doings, particularly regarding the business with Charlotte Martino. We cannot comply with your wishes to keep her, no matter how strong they may be. If you truly have some serious reason for her to stay, we would all hear it. Is there something that requires you to threaten the dignity of our kingdom?”

Gilbert said nothing. He bit his lip, his face pale, at the implication that this would worsen their relationship with Paffuto. Everything up to this point had been inscrutable action after inscrutable action, but now Gilbert appeared solemn for the first time.

Then he seemed to come to a decision and announced gravely, “I cannot state my reason, but it is necessary for Miss Claire to stay here in Lupty as my consort until the end of spring. I used Miss Charlotte as a pawn to achieve this means —”

“Then I think you’d best explain what’s going on, now shouldn’t you?” Vik interrupted, raising an eyebrow. He radiated fury over Gilbert’s attempt to treat Claire as his consort, his tone pointed and forceful.

The king answered as if it were only natural, “Ah, I see. I shall defer this matter to His Highness Prince Vik.”

“Father!” Gilbert protested. “How come Prince Vik’s opinion takes priority over mine?”

“Gilbert, you must pay proper recompense for your treatment of this important young lady. I will allow you to do as you like only to the extent wherein you can still take responsibility for your own actions. We have now reached that point.”

“No!” Gilbert exclaimed.

“Game o-ver, Gilbert,” Pooh said, just as Gilbert sank to his knees. His guardsmen hoisted him up and carried him off to the palace in disgrace, Pooh flying overhead and heaping scorn on him all the while. He made quite the pitiful sight.

Claire asked, “Vik, would you mind if I joined you when you speak to Prince

Gilbert?”

“Of course not,” said Vik. He hesitated before asking, “But do you feel safe enough to do so?”

Claire met his concern with a smile. Certainly, after days of being told they weren’t free to go home, most noble girls would be so frightened that they wouldn’t want to so much as see Gilbert’s face. Yet the things Gilbert had said and done had aroused too much of Claire’s concern. If he spoke with Vik without her present, he might tell Vik that this world of theirs was only a fantasy. *Judging by Prince Gilbert’s conversation with His Majesty, I think he might not*, she thought, *but I’d prefer to err on the side of caution.*

“All right,” Vik said. “I’ll give Prince Gilbert some time to calm down. Then, we’ll go see him together.”

“Thank you, Vik.”

This way, she could learn what Gilbert had been thinking and probably stop him before he said anything that would harm the world and all the people in it. She felt relieved.

Vik turned back to the king. “As you hosted the tournament, I would like to inform you that I was the one who captured this beast. I’m afraid I did not register to participate prior to the event, but would you still allow me to collect my prize?”

“But of course,” said the king. “You may submit your catch over there for evaluation.”

“You have my thanks.”

Claire blinked in confusion as she listened to Vik and the king’s good-natured exchange. “Pardon?” she said. “Vik, you caught that Black Shuck?”

“That I did. Did I do a poor job of it? I thought I brought it back in rather good condition, if I do say so myself.”

“No, not at all,” Claire said. “But I was certain that Lui had caught it.”

The Black Shuck was so enormous it could not even fully fit in the cart. If it came to life and sprang at her, the sheer sight would be horrifying. *I’m so glad*

Vik was okay, Claire thought. She was lost for words out of surprise and concern both.

“To be perfectly accurate,” Lui told her, “Vik did for it after I slowed it with a spell. Shockingly, Vik’s rather capable himself, you know. He can handle a little thing like this.”

“Well, I suppose,” said Vik. “At any rate, I’m not hurt, so it’s all right. There’s no need for you to worry.”

“Besides, Vik hasn’t had a lot of opportunities for exercise lately, so he’s getting rusty.”

“That’s because I’m drowning in so much paperwork Keith refuses to practice with me. He says that if I have the time to swing a sword, I should be sealing documents instead.”

“A sentiment I know all too well.”

Now Claire understood. If Vik and Lui felt well enough to bicker, then this really was no cause for concern. She had heard that fiends were often executed by orders of the knighthood, but perhaps it was not as difficult as all that if a powerful mage and a fine swordsperson teamed up. Granted, it was difficult to find such a pairing outside of the knighthood; Vik and Lui’s partnership surpassed extraordinary.

Claire watched them, lost in thought, until a realization struck her. *I know they carried Prince Gilbert back to the castle, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that the tournament is canceled, is it?*

Just as this momentous fact occurred to her, she heard a voice from a rear pavilion announce, “And we have the results! The largest creature caught today is the Black Shuck, and thus our winner is the man who captured it, the Crown Prince of Paffuto: His Royal Highness Prince Vik.”

Claire was internally overcome with confusion.

Joyous shouts of celebration erupted from the pavilions. Lui and Vik nodded to one another calmly in the midst of the jubilation.

“As is only proper,” Vik said. “A Black Shuck’s a tricky beast to catch. If that

didn't win the competition, then what would?"

"Good thing for us that Pooh isn't the type to do things by halves," Lui said. "One wouldn't typically think to procure a fiend. They'd probably bring in a wolf at best, I'd say."

It was a shame that this result would never have occurred if not for Gilbert cheating, but all present would have been better served had Gilbert not connived in the first place. Claire sighed, recalling the beyond pitiful image of the prince.

Vik gently took her hand. "Claire, the Lupty hunting tournament has a special significance to it, you know."

"Yes, I am aware," she said. "Of old, it was held so that the members of the royal family could ask for their bride's hand in marriage."

Vik looked right at her with his emerald green eyes, giving her a shock. Her heart suddenly began to thunder. He kissed the back of her hand, a slight smile playing across his lips, as if it had been his intent to make her heartbeat skyrocket.

"And that is the very reason I hastened here as soon as I had word from the king."

"What do you mean, Vik?"

"So I could earn the winner's prize. A kiss from the goddess."

Claire started. Oh, how she wished he had waited. She could do nothing but turn bright red and stiffen when Vik pressed her for a kiss in front of such a crowd. *Wait!* she thought. *Is he serious?* She felt everyone's eyes on her as she tried to come up with a way to escape the situation. Yet in her state of half panic, nothing came to mind. To make matters worse, there was Vik right before her, looking confident and every inch the prince. She could find no way around this.

The king realized what was happening and, amused, put in, "The hunting tournament is tradition in Lupty. Folk often say that refusing the goddess's blessing will bring dark days upon us—but that's no more than superstition, really. I'm a great believer; however, don't let that concern you in any way. I

fear those dark days will be Lupty's cross to bear, not Paffuto's, but pay that no mind either."

Vik chuckled lightly as the king came to his assistance with a spot of humor, and Claire froze. *But wasn't Charlotte the goddess anyway?* she thought. *Oh, but if I said that now, I'd sound awfully boorish.*

She braced herself and then turned back to Vik as he toyed with his own fingers in glee.

"Would you mind bending down slightly?" she asked.

"Not at all."

Given the difference in their heights, Claire could not give Vik his congratulatory kiss as they were. She flushed when she realized how he always stooped naturally to accommodate her. She stood on her tiptoes ever so slightly and planted a kiss on Vik's cheek—or rather, she meant to, but moments before her lips grazed the side of his face, he put a hand to her chin.

Claire reacted involuntarily.



The bystanders broke into massive applause as Claire's and Vik's lips touched. The kiss could only have lasted for a mere few seconds, Claire knew, but to her it felt an eternity.

Once the kiss was finished, she whispered, "Vik!" in protest.

Yet Vik just grinned, looking incredibly pleased. "Sorry. That was a rehearsal for a few years down the line. You'll forgive me, won't you?"

Claire should have been furious, but looking at him only made her bashful. *A rehearsal, he says, she repeated to herself. He's right. Why, the way this feels now, it is almost like a wedding.*

She and Vik were sixteen; thanks to a variety of reasons, only their relatives had attended their engagement party, and their wedding was still a few years off. From birth, both Vik and Claire had it drilled into them to place the good of the kingdom above their own feelings, and thus neither had ever felt dissatisfied about all the various rules they had to follow before marriage. But now that she saw how much Vik looked forward to their wedding, she felt well and truly pleased.

Just then, Charlotte spoke up blithely, "Oh! Why, if it isn't the Prince of Paffuto."

Crumbs were smeared around her lips; evidently, she must have been snacking in the goddess's pavilion just moments before. Only then did she notice that Gilbert was gone, as she turned to a newly made friend and asked, "Where is Prince Gilbert?"

Vik hesitated before informing her, "Before you worry about him, you and I need to have a talk."

There was none of the sweetness in his tone that had been present only seconds before. None could doubt that Charlotte remained a potential threat to Claire, and in light of that, Vik had turned dreadfully cold.

A salon within the palace meant to entertain visitors was arranged for their discussion. The large glass windows allowed plenty of sunlight to play over the glass table and other glasswork furnishings.

Claire sat down across from Charlotte in this quintessentially Luptian environment. Vik took the seat next to her, while Lui, Keith, and Denis stood behind them at guard. Dion, Claire noted, had remained in Paffuto; Vik had instructed him to prioritize his work as the Reines' tutor over the trip to Lupty. Certainly, having a full complement of guards come to bring her home would give off the impression that this was no routine affair, Claire supposed. She deemed Vik's choice the correct course of action so as not to give the Reines or other Paffish noble families too much cause for worry.

"Look," Charlotte began primly, "we're in Lupty, okay? Since Prince Gilbert brought me here, you can't drag me back to Noston. The prince would never have it."

Gilbert sat at her side with Pooh on his shoulder. Pooh yawned, looking awfully sleepy, but Gilbert's face was as pale as ever. *I suppose Prince Gilbert is now understanding the ramifications of what he's done*, Claire thought. However, even though Vik saw the same thing she did, his stern expression showed no signs of softening.

"We will speak with His Highness later," Vik said. "For now, you're the one we're talking to, Charlotte."

"I just told you," Charlotte whined, "I'm Prince Gilbert's *gues*—"

"The Martino family has entrusted this matter to me in full. Lord Oscar offered to go out of his way to come take you home, but it is a long journey from Noston to Lupty. I would not have you pushing and shoving to get your way up until he arrives."

"Pushing and shoving!"

"You heard me."

Charlotte's eyes widened and froze there. "You're awful."

Oh, Charlotte, Claire thought. A few seconds later, a smattering of tears dripped onto the back of Charlotte's hand. Claire had seen this happen numerous times in her first life: around the family dining table, in the student council room at the Academy, or even in the dormitories. Charlotte's tears were a curious thing. Even without her brainwashing spell, she could use them to

turn every person in a room into her wholehearted supporter. Claire had to wonder just how often she'd felt helpless against Charlotte's tears. How long had it been since she'd seen the futility in pushing back and simply given up? Claire remembered how she used to be, and how she'd sacrifice her dignity in exchange for thinking of Charlotte as no more than her sweet little sister.

However, today Claire had Vik with her. *Vik has never been moved by Charlotte's tears*, she recalled. That she had met a partner she could so wholeheartedly trust was such a blessing.

Vik's composed tone sounded unnaturally loud in the salon as he spoke. "My kingdom of Paffuto and Lupty are allies with strong connections, as no doubt Prince Gilbert is well aware. You will be sent back to Noston with all haste by way of Paffuto, and whatever happens after that shall be up to Lord Oscar as head of the Martino family."

"You can't!" Charlotte cried. "Prince Gilbert, say something! You brought me here, didn't you? I thought you were going to marry me!"

When she called on him, Gilbert answered listlessly, "You know, I started wondering this earlier during the hunting tournament: How did you ever come by the misunderstanding that I would marry you? I don't recall saying I would at any point."

"You liar! All the other girls told me! Why else would you bring me away from my homeland unless you were thinking about the two of us building a life together?"

"I have no idea what they told you, but I can at least say that was not my intent."

"Huh?" Charlotte exclaimed. "But I'm the main character! Isn't the prince of the neighboring kingdom *supposed* to fall in love with the main character?"

Her voice rose into a shout so shrill that all the others looked on in disgust, save for one: Gilbert. He froze and stared at the girl sitting next to him, a fact which did not escape Claire's notice. *He is surprised to hear her mention this main character business*, she thought, *and I'm sure I know why*—to wit, that three "outsiders" were present at this meeting. Claire doubted that Charlotte and Gilbert loved their lives in this world as she did, but if nothing else, all three

knew it was a video game. And each, she assumed, had separate goals.

As Claire worked to understand the situation with as much levelheadedness as she could, Charlotte shouted even more wrathfully, “You’re the absolute worst! You *tricked* me and used me. How dare you!”

“Charlotte,” Claire said. As Charlotte rose, Claire reached out to catch her arm. “Never mind about that. Let’s be off to Noston.”

“You always smooth over everything and sweep issues under the rug! Let go of me!” Charlotte tried to shake her off and dash past, but in a flash, Vik interceded and blocked her path.

Claire had known since she was a child why she had chaperones with her. Naturally, they were for her own protection, but they also served the dual purpose of protecting her family. They would not suffer any to besmirch the family’s honor, a fact which she could have sworn she’d explained to Charlotte before. Had Claire still been the person she was not long ago, she likely would have tried to admonish Charlotte once more. However, Claire no longer had any desire to do such a thing. If anything, she felt such a sense of futility that talking would doubtless lead her nowhere. She and Charlotte were, at heart, too fundamentally different.

I am letting my family handle Charlotte’s business, she thought. Oscar will decide what to do with her, and yet... And yet did that truly sit well with her? Charlotte being Charlotte, it was all too likely that she would break out and run away from the abbey. Far from the capital though the north may’ve been, the roads between could not be completely blocked off. Even with no magical power, Charlotte could use her honeyed words to wheedle her way to an escape and once again wreak havoc upon someone else later.

Vik looked as if he shared Claire’s concern. “Claire, we’d be awfully naive if we thought packing her off to the abbey would spell the end of it.”

Claire said nothing. While she did not reply, Charlotte shrilled once more, “The abbey? But that’s where Claire goes, not me! How could this possibly happen? It’s not right, I tell you! I haven’t done anything wrong. I haven’t done *anything* wrong!”

In the midst of the clamor, Gilbert, who had watched the whole thing in a

dazed shock, feebly called to one of the guards, “Take Charlotte Martino to the dungeons. I want several locks on her, both physical and magical, and see to it that you assign a female knight to keep an eye on her.”

“The dungeons?!” Charlotte yelled. “But why? I haven’t done anything wrong, I tell you! Let go of me! Don’t you dare touch me!”

As she kicked and struggled, the guards dragged her from the salon. Once her screams no longer rattled the glass curios decorating the room, Gilbert collapsed in on himself—or so it appeared to Claire, until his forehead touched the marble floor and he began to plead. “You have my deepest apologies, but I dearly wish that you might stay here until spring’s end. Please, I would have your help if at all possible. We may not have reached the good end of the Gilbert route, but all the same...” Gilbert paused before surging on. “I cannot bear to see this world vanish before my eyes, not once again. Please, I am begging you. Won’t you please stay a little longer? Just until spring is over?”

He looked so very desperate that he struck everyone else in the room speechless. Even the chatterbox that was Pooh widened his eyes and said not a word. Claire thought she might be the only one of them who understood what Gilbert was saying, but not a one could speak up with this bizarre sight in front of them.

It was she who finally broke the silence. “Your Highness, might I assume there is something particular about the end of spring?”

Gilbert gulped. He did not raise his head and only continued with his desperate pleas. “I’m afraid you wouldn’t believe me even if I told you. You must be growing more suspicious of me by the minute, but I would hate it if this were to be the thing that made you turn tail and run. Please, couldn’t you stay in Lupty until spring is over without me telling you the reason? Couldn’t you? I’m begging you.”

Vik grabbed his shoulder and hauled him upright. “First off, quit your groveling, will you? We can’t have a proper talk when you’re hysterical and we can’t even see your face. The Gilbert Héctor Legrange I know should be aware of that much, at least.”

“Oh, Prince Vik...” Hearing the friendship in Vik’s voice, Gilbert finally looked

up.

Vik reminded him, “The King of Paffuto tasked me to help this wayward prince. It may very well be a coincidence, but your royal father not long ago asked me to do the exact same thing. To my mind, that amounts to a royal decree from the kings of two countries. So tell us what’s going on; there’s a good lad.”

Gilbert gulped again. As he registered the meaning of what Vik had said, a slight bit of color returned to his cheeks, and his lips stopped trembling. In Claire’s view, he certainly looked to have calmed down. Keith helped him to the sofa he had occupied earlier, where he took a seat and once again began to hesitate about confessing the truth.

“A-ny day now, Gilbert. Don’t keep them wai-ting,” Pooh commented.

“You don’t need to be so harsh, not at a time like this,” Gilbert groaned. But the stern rebuke appeared to help him make up his mind.

He spoke with no confidence as, faltering with fear, he began, “You see, this is my...third life.”

A shock ran through the people assembled. It was clearly not the response Gilbert had expected to receive, as he looked around at all of them with his head tilted in genuine bewilderment. “How come you aren’t laughing at me?”

Everyone here knew this was Claire’s second life, so learning that Gilbert was on his third, while surprising, gave no cause for laughter. Claire knew this, but she forced herself to sound as calm as she could while replying, “First, let us hear your story.”

“Ah, yes, very well.” He paused. “This is my third life. Each life begins when I am fourteen and fall down the stairs. Likewise, each ends in the spring of my nineteenth year when a magical tornado destroys me.”

Vik hesitated before asking, “Do you mean to say you know about the upcoming magical tornado?”

Gilbert clung to that affirmation of his story desperately. “Oh, so you know about it too? But it is no ordinary magical tornado, to be sure. It is the largest in all of history; I’ve never seen any like it, even in the historical record books. The

sky over the whole kingdom grows inky and ominous, and while we assemble the mages to discuss a way to counteract it, it takes form and...devours the kingdom whole. After that, I never recall a thing, and I return to being fourteen again.”

Claire felt everyone around her go speechless at such a detailed account. *That must be why Gilbert wants me to stay here until the end of spring*, she thought. *It also explains why he lost all interest in Charlotte once he learned she could not do white magic.*

She recalled a suspicion about this she had nursed not long before when thoughts of the magical tornado had crossed her mind. Riko, her friend in the other world, had told her about the DLC with its completely different storyline. There, the main character used a barrier spell to protect the capital from the tornado, which then resulted in her receiving an invitation to the prince’s ball. However, the question remained: What had happened to the other lands not under the barrier’s protection? The magic tornado was a terrifying thing indeed, as it sowed destruction across the world for several days without end. With only Paffuto under the spell’s protection, Claire would not have been surprised if other kingdoms were annihilated altogether.

Suddenly, Claire remembered her dream of the room on the other side of the glass that she’d seen the day before she decided to visit Lupty. She thought she could recall the book on the table saying, “An all-new game. Solve the mystery of Lupty as the kingdom faces destruction.” *Now I understand*, she thought. *Prince Gilbert is the poster boy for this new game, and while the mystery remains unsolved, his life keeps looping over and over.* Most likely, she assumed, the good ending of his route culminated in the tornado passing over Lupty harmlessly. Thus, he’d tried to resolve the issue by getting the good ending, forced attempts at activating cutscenes and all.

“I simply have no idea what to do anymore,” Gilbert said. “You were supposed to be our savior, but you almost never appear. And now when I’ve finally found you, this happens.”

Gilbert did not touch on the crux of the matter, namely that the world that they inhabited belonged to a dating sim. Claire, in the same boat as him, had a hunch as to why. He wasn’t a bad person, surely, if he could show their

companions this much consideration, she thought. The one misfortune was that Claire was no video game protagonist, but a real human being with her own free will.

It all made sense to her now. Claire turned to Gilbert and told him in no uncertain terms, "Your Highness, I cannot stay here through the end of spring."

"No!" he cried.

"However, I swear to you that I will purify this tornado."

This astounded him. Claire tried to explain the matter as calmly as she could, speaking slowly, so as to soothe him in his agitated state.

"I understand that you wish to keep me here," she began, "so that I can cast a purification spell. However, this tornado threatens Paffuto just as badly. Henceforth, I swear I will purify it before it can do any damage anywhere."

"Oh, it will affect Paffuto too? I wonder why I never realized that before. Surely if a tornado is so large as to destroy Lupty, other kingdoms will be threatened as well. Oh, what a heartless creature I am!"

Gilbert broke out into tremors once more, but Vik remarked with ease, "Nonsense, Your Highness. Saving his kingdom is every monarch's greatest concern. You've done nothing shameful. In fact, I think you should take pride in it."

"Oh, Prince Vik..."

"Fortunately, my betrothed has peerless magical ability," Vik said. "You will not keep her here as your paramour, but I am sure she can help in another form."

"And to think I caused you all such trouble," said Gilbert. "I am so very sorry." Tears glistened in his eyes.

He wiped them away and gave Vik yet another deep bow just as Pooh jeered, "May-be this is the good en-ding of the Vik route, hmm?"

Lui whispered in Claire's ear, "This Pooh fellow is quite the character. It almost makes me want to take him home with us."

Claire giggled. "I know what you mean."

And now these two different storylines have become one, she thought. Even in the bugged universe where the main character never shows up, Lupty will be safe.

It was a universe she should never have had anything to do with in the first place, yet all the same, she felt relieved that she could save it.

Chapter 18

Claire completed the rest of her stay according to her itinerary before returning to Paffuto. Prior to her departure, she had successfully purified a pestilence, its strength on par with a large magical tornado, out of a magical tool in the metered magic room. Once that was complete, she felt fully prepared for the real thing.

Presently, Claire's friends had gathered in her rooms for the evening to celebrate her making it home safe and sound. Vik was not her sole guest; Keith, Denis, and Lui had all finished work early to come, and Dion did not have his work at the Reines' occupying him today.

The table boasted a dignified spread of beverages, confections, and finger foods. Many of the things on offer were Claire's favorites, which she assumed was a kind gesture from her maid Sophie.

Now that she could once again spend time with her loved ones, Claire felt like she was finally home. She got the same sense from Vik, who had played the perfect prince in Lupty. He appeared more at home than ever as he sat next to her.

"Say, Claire, you don't know the exact day this tornado will show up, do you?" he asked.

"I do not, no," she said. "Since I was unconscious, my memories of those few days are rather fuzzy."

"No worries. With magic as strong as yours, I'm sure you'll be the first to pick up on any omens about the tornado forming."

She dipped her head in a nod, and Vik ruffled her hair as if to tell her not to fret over it. Claire had to wonder: When had they last been so lighthearted together? She felt like she had come home all over again.

"And I'm glad you were able to do your purification test run in front of Gilbert," Vik added. "That'll give him peace of mind whenever the tornado

decides to show up, I should think.”

“I would certainly hope so.” As she spoke, her mind wandered back to the few days she had spent in Gilbert’s company, and how he had tried to use every means in his power to win her heart and the good ending alike. He made for a horribly worrying prince, but Claire thought his love for his kingdom was sincere.

As Vik also thought back on his time with Gilbert, mixed feelings played across his face. “The mental image I had of Prince Gilbert was how I knew him before we were both fourteen. You know, the talented and levelheaded sort. He seldom let people in and confided in them little and less.” Vik paused before adding, “Or so one would assume. Not speaking from personal experience, you know.”

Lui teased with a hint of exasperation, “Are you sure you’re talking about Prince Gilbert, there?”

Denis snorted into his tea. “I don’t know the guy well, but I gotta say, he never struck me as all that princely. You’ve got your cute childish side, Vik, but that’s peanuts next to him. Remember how that owl of his kept making fun of him?”

“Well, he said he kept having to go back to being fourteen,” Vik pointed out. “Maybe that changed him. I can’t imagine what he must have gone through.”

Claire quietly lifted her teacup to her lips. *I doubt that’s all of it*, she thought. *It must be because Prince Gilbert knows the world we live in is a fiction.* Yet Gilbert had not said as much during her whole stay. He explained it away by saying he thought the others would not believe him, but she chalked it up to his kindness and nobleness of spirit. In that regard, she saw him as quite a worthy monarch indeed.

She suddenly felt Vik’s eyes on her and looked up. He fixed her with a tender gaze. Claire smiled, feeling that it’d be best to share what was on her mind. “You know, it occurred to me how the King of Lupty must have felt. That is to say, he had to watch his son act so odd this whole time and only had his fears put to rest at the very last minute.”

“I was thinking the same.”

Claire giggled, and her eyes met Vik's.

As they shared a smile, Claire overheard Denis poking fun at them. "Oooh," he teased, "look at them, practically finishing each other's sentences. I guess absence does make the heart grow fonder."

Claire couldn't argue with that one, so she laughed again.

When she woke up in her long-missed bed in the detached palace, a headache made her grimace in pain.

"Is something troubling you, Miss Claire?" Sophie asked, concerned, as she came in to open the curtains and bring Claire her hot water and herbal tea.

Claire did not want to cause a fuss, so she endeavored to stretch as she normally would and said, "No, I am feeling quite well, thank you. More to the point, I have some urgent business today and will not be going to school. Could you let Vik know at your earliest convenience?"

"Yes, Miss Claire." Sophie put away Claire's school uniform, puzzled.

Claire cast a sidelong glance at her maid and exhaled a puff of air. *I know what this portends*, she thought. *Today is the day: the day of the tornado.*

She rose, opened her lace curtains, and looked up at the leaden, overcast sky. The air carried the slight humidity of late spring. Nothing was visible yet, but she knew that it would be only a matter of hours before a huge, murky maelstrom appeared.

Once Claire finished dressing, she found Dion waiting for her in the living room. She supposed Sophie must have spread the news that she was not going to school today.

"I heard you're staying home," Dion said inquisitively. "Is there something I could assist with?"

"Well, I am about to head to Vik's. Would you care to accompany me?"

"It would be my pleasure."

She'd found out after the fact that Dion had been in the Mead earldom during the magical tornado of her first life. Only Wurtz received omen of the tornado,

she learned, and as such, it had taken time for other parts of the kingdom to be informed of its successful purification. That meant this was Dion's first time seeing a magical tornado himself, and yet he led the way for Claire with total nonchalance.

"We could teleport if you're in a hurry," he offered.

"No, thank you," Claire said. "I'd prefer to save my magic."

"Oh, I see. Yes, it doesn't hurt to be too careful, even with the experiment you tried back in Lupty under your belt." Dion paused. "You know, this is the first time I've ever seen you keep an eye on your magic levels."

"It's just to be on the safe side."

She and Dion tried their hardest to converse in as normal a fashion as possible all the way to Vik's office. As they opened the door, Vik turned from the window where he had been gazing outside.

"Ah, I thought you might be coming soon," he said.

"Where are the others?" Claire asked.

"Lui noticed the warning signs this morning before anyone else, so we've already leapt into action." He broke off and then, after a moment, added, "I must say, the sky is an incredible shade right now."

"That it is."

She joined him at the window and looked out. The sky had grown far darker since she'd seen it last from her room. Lightning flashed, followed by a rumble of thunder. The tornado's formation was drawing closer by the minute, she judged.

As he looked up, Vik asked, "Do you know when you'll purify it?"

"I believe that I acted just moments before it formed last time," Claire said. "The whole sky above the capital was clouded over and pitch-black."

"I see. At its current rate..." Vik paused to think. "I estimate we have another couple dozen minutes before there's complete cloud cover."

"Indeed. Let's go out to the balcony."

Claire tried to keep her head as best she could, but her heart rate accelerated nonetheless. Her purification test run at the facility in Lupty had gone off without a hitch, but using a special tool to make and purify a miasma as powerful as the biggest magical tornado in all of human history lacked the same sense of danger she felt now. She knew from Lui that the more one practiced magic, the less magical power they expended; supposedly, this was due to the spirits becoming willing to cast spells for the mage in question using only the slightest magical power. Claire could understand the theory behind it, and she did have the success of the practical experiment to bolster her, but all the same, she felt slightly frightened. *I just don't want to go back to that room beyond the glass*, she thought. She pictured that bedroom, with its fluorescent lights and game console.

Everyone she cared for was here, but what if she were thrust away from them? What if she could never return to this same world again? And what if she had to start all over again on her own, with only her memories to rely on? The mere thought of it made her feel helpless.

Vik immediately picked up on her distress and started making small talk to calm her nerves. "Claire, you don't look so hot. You didn't eat breakfast, did you?"

"Well, now that you mention it..." She hadn't. It hit her that, despite her pains to put on the bravest face she could and to feign being calm, she hadn't so much as touched the meal Sophie had brought in for her. *I suppose I'm horribly nervous*, she thought. She stopped on the landing of the stairs leading up to the balcony and forced herself to relax her unconsciously clenched fists. Her legs felt leaden from fear, and her palms bore the imprints of her nails.

Vik traced a fingertip over those imprints and whispered to her, concerned, "I wish I could help you purify it. That I can't leaves me feeling awfully cross."

"It's all right, Vik," she said with a hurried shake of her head. "I'm just a little frightened because it's dark out, that's all."

She knew that was a childish excuse, but she hoped that he'd allow her that much. Vik evidently caught her drift and did not fan the flames of her dread further. The talk of breakfast was probably just another attempt of his to take

her mind off her worries, she figured.

“My hands are cold,” she confessed.

“They are,” he agreed. “You should have a bite of something. I noticed you didn’t touch your breakfast, so I brought something along just in case.”

Dion, considerately standing a short distance away, produced a small paper bag that contained breakfast bread and a kouign-amann. He passed it to her with a beaming grin.

“Sure, it’s bad manners to eat while standing,” he said, “but you’ll perk right up once you get some sweet things in you.”

“Thank you.” She hurried to tuck into the treats. As sweet and fragrant as they were, she did not even register the taste, which spoke to the level of her disquietude. But it would be a disaster if her physical strength gave out before her magical power, so she managed to wolf down the food.

As she ate, Dion told her, “The Reines were gracious enough to have me for dinner while you were in Lupty. That made me realize something. They treat me with such kindness because they know, deep in their heart of hearts, that it’ll make me a better, happier person.”

Claire nodded silently, which Dion took as his cue to continue. “I think I’d like to use that same kindness to help someone else. They saved you and me both from a fix—oh, but I’m not only talking about the Reines. You may not be able to tell just by looking, but all the people you’ve saved are connected, in some place deep inside of us.” He broke off. “And that’s what this kouign-amann means to me.” He broke off again. “Ugh. Your Highness, how in the world do I phrase this?”

Dion frowned and looked to Vik for rescue. Vik grinned. “What he’s trying to say is don’t worry. You’re not alone, Claire.”

Claire started. The words struck such a chord with her amid all her anxiety. The unsteady sensation she’d felt earlier vanished, and the warmth began to return to her fingers.

Just then, the door to the upper balcony opened.

“Claire! Are you all right?” Lui called.

“Oh!” Claire cried.

There stood Keith, Denis, and Lui, who had apparently beat her to the scene. The fact that these were the first words they greeted her with threatened to bring tears to her eyes. The knights lived to guard the realm, so this state of emergency must have been a taxing thing for them indeed. Yet in spite of all they had on their plates, they worried for Claire the instant they saw her pale face. She could not express how grateful that made her feel.

Right, she said to herself. *What am I worried about anyway? I am not alone.* A single beam of light shone through the war of anxiety that now waged inside of her over the thought that she might be thrust from the world.

With their hands still clasped together, Vik led her out onto the balcony. She looked up at the sky and noticed the distortions of magical energy forming and tangling together here and there. The inky black clouds covered the entire capital, and lightning struck with surging frequency. It would be any minute now, Claire knew. But now that the moment was before her, strangely, she did not feel afraid any longer.

“My word,” Lui murmured behind her. “I’ve read of this in books numerous times, but I’ve never seen one with my own eyes.”

“It’s our lucky day,” Denis quipped. “I just hope we get to see the swirly bit too.”

“You jest.”

Claire couldn’t help but giggle at their dialogue. Sweat beaded Vik’s forehead, but he grinned teasingly too. “Are you feeling better now?”

“I’m sorry I was such a fraidy-cat a moment ago,” she jokingly apologized back.

Vik squeezed her hand again. She hadn’t noticed before, but his hands were trembling faintly. It reminded her all over again that she was not alone in this.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “It will be all right.”

He paused before saying, “I know.”

With Vik holding her hand by her side, and with her friends behind her, Claire felt her fear ebb away. She could sense that her loved ones were spurring her on with everything they had, and that was all she needed to calm her heart, once frozen stiff with fear. Now she knew she would have no trouble borrowing the power of the spirits.

After signaling Vik with her eyes, Claire filled every nook and cranny of her body with magical power, bit by bit so that it would not all drain out at once. Some would typically seep out, but today she treated it with extra special care, refining it into exceptionally fine magical power to offer to the spirits.

Then, she chanted the words of the spell she had last spoken a year and a half ago: “Oh spirits, in exchange for this power, I beseech you to purify the sky.”

Immediately, the world around them grew so bright it dazzled the eyes.

Epilogue

After that frenetic spring, the Paffish Royal Academy let out for the summer. Claire spent every day to its utmost. She called on her tutor each morning for finishing lessons, before passing the afternoons overseeing Isabella's studies at the Reines'. She never grew tired of this routine, no matter how oft she repeated it.

Yet, another of her close companions seemed so fed up with the summer holidays, he appeared to be on the verge of running away from them altogether. When she dropped by Vik's office on the way back from her finishing lessons, she had to bat an eye at the way the room's primary occupant sprawled listlessly in his seat.

"Vik, where did that letter you're reading come from?" she asked.

"Ah, good timing," said Vik. "It's from Prince Gilbert, and it's really something. I was about to die from boredom here, but this put me back on my feet enough to keep going all afternoon."

Claire started in confused alarm. He handed her the letter matter-of-factly; it had a noticeable weight to it. Asbert's old reports to Claire before he had been won over by Nicola's charms had been lengthy letters, but they were mere notes compared to this one. Claire was indeed curious about what Gilbert, Pooh, and a certain third person in their relative vicinity were up to, but no amount of curiosity warranted anything of *this* length.

Her eyes traveled down the page.

Gilbert wrote first of Charlotte, and Claire learned that her sister was presently incarcerated in a jail attached to an abbey in Lupty. The original plan had been to send her to the abbey in Noston, but for fear of Charlotte breaking out, that idea had been quickly discarded. Surprisingly, Gilbert had been the one to suggest an abbey in the Luptian marches, far from Noston. It sat on the summit of a high mountain, making it a rather difficult place to visit. A portal

from Chaldoux connected the abbey to the outside world, but as Charlotte lacked magical power, all assumed that escape would prove impossible for her. Furthermore, Gilbert explained, she would live in an all-female environment to prevent the girl from winning herself supporters, as was her wont. Additionally, the abbey's inhabitants spoke their own language. While it might not serve to rehabilitate her into society, it was the ideal place for her to register the gravity of her crimes, he judged.

The letter went on to inform Claire that Gilbert planned to pay Charlotte periodic visits. Perhaps, he hoped, she might feel some connection to him as a fellow outsider.

Claire sighed once she'd read up to that point. *I understand where Prince Gilbert is coming from, she thought. And I do feel rather bad for Charlotte, because being the main character means none of this has ever been real to her. Therefore, she harbors zero remorse for what she's done. But I doubt she wants my sympathy any more than I want to give it.*

The letter went on to express his thanks for Claire's purification of the tornado and to share the happy news that Lupty remained free from harm. Pooh, the king, the young noble ladies, and all the rest were well. Furthermore, word had gotten out that Gilbert had let Claire use the knighthood facility's room to purify the tornado, and even if the populace should have taken him for a fool, his reputation had skyrocketed instead. Here he added a request for her to please keep mum about the truth. Claire knew both how inept and sincere he was and therefore vowed to herself that she'd do just that.

In closing, the letter included an invitation to a hunting tournament.

"Pardon me?" she said, baffled. "Are they hosting yet another tournament?"

"So it would seem," answered Vik.

"But isn't the Luptyan hunting tournament a special affair? Surely they couldn't hold so many in the same year, I should think."

Vik burst into laughter at Claire's bewilderment. "Take a closer look at the invitation. Believe it or not, it's addressed to Lui."

Claire yelled in surprise. She looked down again at the envelope, which was bordered in lace and made from high-quality paper. Sure enough, it bore Lui's name. Whatever could that mean?

As she blinked in shock, Vik chuckled and explained, "I take it that Gilbert is into the strong, older-sisterly type. Looks like he went out of his way to learn more about her station and draft up this invitation to her."

It took Claire a moment to speak. "So does that mean he's not inviting her to participate? He wants her as the goddess?"

She glanced up at Lui, who was calmly filing paperwork at the other end of the office. She certainly didn't look like she thought this letter was anything worthy of her attention.

Nearby, Keith groaned. "How in the world are we going to respond to this?"

Denis moseyed over to the bookshelf and asked, "Say, Lui, are you planning on going?"

"If they'll let me hunt fiends, then I will."

"Ooh, I wouldn't if I were you. This Prince Gilbert's an awfully funny chap. It could be dangerous, you know?"

"I'll grant you that," she said. "But it all sounds rather fun."

"Wait, you're serious? No, you can't!"

Claire tittered and then handed the massive letter to Vik. *We certainly had quite the eventful spring*, she said to herself.

Vik smiled back tenderly, as if he were thinking the same. "Spring next year will present us with even more challenges, between my investiture and your public debut."

"Yes," she said. "I am sure it will be difficult, but truth be told, I simply cannot wait."

"Nor can I."

The dry wind of summer fluttered the curtains. She had made it at last, and all in one piece. And that she could stay in the land she loved with those she held

most dear—well, for that, Claire was grateful indeed.

The End

Extra Story: Charlotte's Woes

Charlotte Martino wound up at the Monceauloux Abbey of Lupty. The abbey perched atop a lofty mountain summit, a place no ordinary person was like to reach. It promised her a life almost entirely cut off from the outside, within the confines of its own little world. This aspect had led to its reputation as a prison and a place to repent for one's crimes.

One of its nuns kept a journal.

A fifteen-year-old girl arrived here a month ago by the name of Charlotte Martino. She has such long, soft, springy hair and adorable eyes. Everything about her down to her high-pitched, sweet voice charms others.

But she is a criminal. She has made attempts to slander the monarchy of another kingdom. She is a thief. She cast a dangerous spell with the intent of harming her older sister and her sister's fiancé, also a member of the monarchy. She has used brainwashing spells with the intent of controlling other people's minds. And after all those misdeeds, she escaped justice and fled her homeland.

The Martino family holds a frightening amount of influence in Noston. Yet if she comes from such a prestigious background, why did she commit such disgraceful deeds? We must keep a watchful eye on her.

Charlotte's chaperone, Yuria, slammed her journal shut. The aforementioned Charlotte Martino had spent the last month or so since her arrival in a solitary cell, but from today on, she would be allowed to join the other nuns. Most of them were not criminals but had their own particular reasons for being here.

Among all of the problem cases at the abbey, Charlotte was the worst. Thus, she had been placed in Yuria's charge, as Yuria was a veteran of the abbey's attached orphanage.

"Although I certainly didn't want this responsibility," Yuria huffed to herself

before leaving her room.

“My name is Yuria, and I will be your chaperone,” she informed Charlotte. “Feel free to ask me any questions you might have.”

Charlotte Martino tilted her head with a blank look of confusion at this succinct salutation. “Okay, I’ve got one. How do I get out of here? I’ve had it with this place! The solitary cells are dark and tiny and musty. They won’t let me go anywhere, and I feel like I’m going to lose my mind! Even the food is so plain.” Charlotte paused before barreling on. “Plus, practically nobody here speaks my language. What’s the big idea anyway, huh? I mean, this is carrying on way too long for a post-bad-ending epilogue! When’s it going to end? When I die?”

Yuria frowned as Charlotte ranted about whatever crossed her mind without even having the courtesy to say hello first. “I’m afraid those questions don’t fall into the scope of things I can comment on.”

She had felt revulsion from the moment she laid eyes on Charlotte in her solitary cell, and that feeling had only grown worse when she later received and read an account of Charlotte’s history. She failed to understand how someone could be raised to want for nothing, only to later turn around and attempt to bring about another’s downfall.

“Let me take you to your room,” Yuria said. “You will be sharing one with me.”

“What? Ew, no way. I didn’t even do anything wrong!”

Try as she might, Yuria could not fathom why anyone would want to release a person like Charlotte from isolation after only a month. As Charlotte screeched behind her, Yuria walked away, her trademark bob bouncing with each brisk footstep. Contempt flickered in her notoriously even-tempered black eyes.

She could hear Charlotte’s angry footsteps lagging further and further behind her, but she did not stop and turn around. At least for the moment, she could not hold back her irritation.

After Yuria showed Charlotte to her room in the dormitory, she brought the girl with her to the main hall used for meetings. “We take breakfast in the dining hall every morning after prayer,” she explained. “Our meal times are at eight in the morning and four in the afternoon. If you are late, you will not eat.”

“There are only two meals?” Charlotte asked. “But what about high tea?”

“We don’t have it, clearly. This is an abbey, and above all else, you are a criminal.”

Charlotte scowled in further disbelief, but Yuria paid her no mind and continued. “You and I will clean the main hall daily. We will have no rest until this entire room is as neat as a pin.”

“Huh?” Charlotte yelped. “Two people to clean this huge room? That has to be impossible! And what’s the point of cleaning a room every day when it’s not even being used?”

“The purpose is an altogether different matter,” said Yuria. “Don’t tell me you don’t even understand that.”

“You have got to be kidding me. I thought I was going to be free once I got out of solitary, but no! I keep telling you, I didn’t do anything wrong!”

She kept repeating that this must’ve been some sort of joke and that she had done no wrong. Yes, Yuria decided, Charlotte must have had a sheltered upbringing indeed. Yet even so, how had a month in solitary done so little to make her new circumstances sink in?

Yuria did not want to talk with Charlotte for a moment longer than was necessary. “Here, I have some things for you,” she said. “Letters, all of them.”

She did not conceal her annoyance as she handed Charlotte six letters. One was from home, one was from Prince Gilbert of Lupty, and the remaining four were all from Claire in Paffuto.

“I couldn’t give those to you while you were in solitary confinement.” Yuria paused for a moment and then added, “It’s a fine thing, having people who care about you when you’ve done nothing but horrors!”

She knew her voice was rising to a fever pitch, yet she could not stop it. Yuria

had been entrusted to the care of the abbey as a babe and had lived her whole life there ever since. She had wanted for nothing due to the kindness of the sisters, for which she was grateful, but truth be told, she also felt lonely at times. She could not comprehend having the fortune to be born into a ducal family and then so easily backstabbing one's parents and siblings, who had treated one so kindly, before driving the family to the brink of ruin. What utter privilege! Hence why Yuria felt such rancor towards Charlotte.

Yet Charlotte responded only flippantly. "What, do you think any of them really care about me? I assure you, no one does." She snorted. "You're so stupid."

Yuria looked at her in confusion. Charlotte had been the picture of confidence just moments before, but now a shadow fell across her face. Yuria could not have said why, but she fell silent.

As it was a lovely day, the windows in the main hall were wide open, and from outside, the voices of children at play in the garden drifted in.

"Are those children?" Charlotte asked.

"Yes. We have an orphanage here, although I grant that this has little and less to do with you."

Charlotte hesitated for a moment and then said, "It sounds like there's an awful lot of them."

"That there are. Most of them do not have any parents. Some of them were brought here the moment they were born, even."

Yuria stopped herself before she added a "Like me." She was loath to discuss the circumstances of her birth with this callow rich girl whose every whim had been catered to.

"They're not letting one of the girls play with the rest of them," Charlotte observed.

"Ah yes. That would be Claire," Yuria said.

For some unknown reason, Charlotte started and turned her eyes away from the little girl. The girl was just a slip of a thing, who stood behind a tree

watching the others at their play. She did not cry, but one hand gripped the trunk of the tree something fierce, and the other clenched a fistful of her skirt.

“She was brought here just last week,” Yuria said. “She’s only four years old.” As she finished speaking, she left the hall.

“Hey! Where’re you going?” Charlotte yelped and raced after her, but Yuria ignored her all the way down the stairs and into the garden.

The air was thin here on the summit of the mountain, but a spell controlled it to make things easier on the people living here. Those without magic had no recourse save for the abbey, for this mountain was a harsh place indeed.

The children noticed Yuria immediately and ran over to her. “Yuria!” they cried.

“Are you done working?” one of the children asked.

“Yuria, come play hide-and-seek with us,” begged another. All the children’s eyes lit up as they invited her to join their play.

Yuria used to have the nuns play with her when she was a child as well. All the orphanage children felt like little brothers and sisters to her.

“Sure,” she said. “Claire, do you want to come be ‘it’ with me?”

At the offer, the tiny little girl named Claire shook her head timidly.

“Okay,” said Yuria. “Then make sure you hide with this nice young lady, all right?”

Charlotte squawked. “You mean me?”

Yuria pointed at her, and Charlotte froze at her unexpected moment in the limelight. Claire nodded shyly, and Yuria started to count. “One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand...”



Charlotte found herself unwillingly roped into this impromptu game of hide-and-go-seek. She stood stock-still as Claire trotted over to her on tiny feet.

Charlotte said nothing. She knew she must’ve looked terribly anxious as she took a timid peek at Claire. This Claire had a swarthy complexion and skinny

limbs; her clothing was clean enough, but her appearance jogged Charlotte's memory.

All of a sudden, her legs moved of their own volition.

"C'mere," she whispered.

"Here?" Claire asked.

"Shh. Don't talk!"

She took Claire by the hand and hid the both of them in a hedge. It was the perfect hiding spot, but Claire looked alarmed to be in such an unfamiliar place.

"It's prickling me," the little girl whined.

"Yeah, it's prickling me too, but do you see me complaining? Look, everyone knows you need to hide up a tree or in a hedge in hide-and-go-seek. Got it?"

The girl stiffened and clammed up at Charlotte's sharp tone. *Oh, shoot*, Charlotte thought. She backpedaled, stumbling over her words in the process. "Never mind. Look, I wasn't trying to make you cry, okay?"

Little Claire said nothing but nodded. She made a whining noise like she was about to burst into sobs, but much to Charlotte's surprise, she bit her lip and held back her tears.

Charlotte fell silent. The girl's face brought back memories of the village where Charlotte was born and raised.



She remembered a time when she was small, before the Martinos had taken her in. In the hamlet near the border of Noston where she and her mother lived, Charlotte watched her mother leave the house.

"Mama's heading out now, Charlotte," her mother told her. "You stay here, all right?"

"Okey dokey," Charlotte said.

It was already past dark, yet her mother talked of going out and leaving Charlotte behind. *Again?* she thought. *I bet mama's going to visit that man with the beard.*

Charlotte had yet to have dinner. There was yesterday's vegetable soup left over in a pot in the kitchen, but the thought of eating that cold, flavorless soup, which at this point was mostly broth, made Charlotte lose her appetite.

At just barely five years old, Charlotte already knew they lacked the money for bread. Yet if freshly baked bread was so hard to come by, how come her mother kept adding to her collection of fancy gowns? Charlotte had once thought that they could not buy food, but clothes were just fine; however, when she had begged for a cute dress for her birthday, it had not been forthcoming either.

Whenever Charlotte's mother went to visit the man with the beard, she was never quick to return home. Charlotte felt lonesome all on her own on those dark nights, but she looked forward to the leftovers from the restaurants her mother would bring back for her: the very bread that was so rare, beef hot pot, stews rich with vegetables... The thought alone had made Charlotte drool and provided her with the moral support needed to wait at home alone.

Looking back on it now, Charlotte guessed that this man with the beard was not a member of the Martino family; he was likely some other beau of her mother's. After all, a man as wealthy as Duke Martino should have been able to provide a comfortable life for his mistress and her daughter. Charlotte now understood that they'd lived in such poverty in spite of the duke's generosity, because her mother had wasted all their money on herself.

In the eyes of childhood Charlotte, her mother was not like other mothers. In the way she would follow her every whim, she was like a little girl who had never grown up. Charlotte did not recall her mother ever once apologizing to her for leaving her all alone, but from her mother's perspective, why should she have? Even as lonesome and hungry as she was, Charlotte had never cried. The thought of troubling her mother with her tears terrified her. She'd always worn a sunny smile on her face and played the part of the darling, lovable little girl.



Ugh, now's not the time for a trip down memory lane! Charlotte told herself.

She clicked her tongue as she squatted in the hedge, and Little Claire, curled up next to her, stiffened.

Charlotte paused. "That was directed at myself. You didn't do anything wrong."

"A-All right," the little girl said.

"By the way," Charlotte added, "I didn't do anything wrong either. I'm not a bad person. Honestly, I have no idea what I'm even doing here."

Claire looked relieved but still watched Charlotte out of the corner of her eye to see what the older girl might do next. She could have been childhood Charlotte's twin, and yet her name was Claire, of all things. But surprisingly enough, Charlotte didn't feel enmity towards this small child holding her breath beside her.



As Yuria wrote in her journal, she paid a sidelong glance to her new roommate snoring away alongside her. *I never expected things to turn out the way they did today*, she thought. *And here I figured she would bolt if I took my eyes off of her.*

Let me chronicle today's happenstances. The new girl, Charlotte, is now to share my room. She is as much of a problem child as the briefing on her describes, complaining about everything and helping with nothing. I attempted to have her write to her family in order to promote her rehabilitation into society, but when I looked away for one second, she managed to curl up in the sheets and fall asleep.

Yet... Yuria added to herself. Her pen scratched further.

Surprisingly, the orphan children have warmed to her. She was particularly quick to notice that poor girl Claire, who just came to us last week. Most of the young noble ladies who visit us for volunteering purposes look on us all with pity, but Charlotte is not like the others. I wonder why she treats us just like everyone else. Why doesn't she give us special treatment?

Yuria stopped there and extinguished the bedroom lamp with a spell.

As several weeks passed, Charlotte settled into life at the abbey.

“Wine’s not supposed to be for *breakfast*, and there’s never any time here to sit and enjoy a cup of tea,” Charlotte complained. “I want to run away, but we’re in the middle of nowhere. Yuria, what even is there to do for fun around here?”

“Right now, I’m having fun observing a disgraced noble lady,” Yuria teased. “And the wine is special. We grow our own grapes and make our own wine. If I were in your shoes, I’d be grateful for a drink.”

“You guys are such commoners! Remember, I grew up in the aristocracy, so I don’t get your peasant ways,” Charlotte groaned.

She and Yuria were always at loggerheads, but they had also bonded to the point where their arguments contained no real heat. In the name of Charlotte’s rehabilitation, Yuria had taken on the duty of checking over Charlotte’s letters to her family, the latest of which demanded new dresses. Charlotte asserted that it was for Claire’s sake, as the younger girl had likely never seen a pretty dress in person, but Yuria assumed that was a load of hogwash. Still, Charlotte really did seem to be close to Claire, going so far as to regift her a set of pretty stationery from Charlotte’s older sister. Calling this a shock would’ve been an understatement.

Presently, it was time for their daily cleaning duties in the main hall. As ever, Charlotte wriggled and whined as Yuria set off for the task. “Hey, Yuria, what if we skipped cleaning the hall today? I think I’ll die of boredom if I have to clean it one more time.”

Yuria paid her no mind. She was at her wit’s end with Charlotte’s ceaseless flippancy. She knew Charlotte’s older sister was engaged to be married to the Crown Prince of Paffuto; Yuria had to wonder, uneasily, if the match was such a good idea as all that.

The two finally reached the hall, Charlotte still whinging all the while. Although the curtains were open, it was dark and gloomy inside, with the rain beating down past the windows.

Their routine was to polish the floor until it shone, with Yuria starting from the corridor side of the room and Charlotte starting from the window side. Charlotte lacked both the drive and the physical ability, so she completed but a fifth of the work Yuria performed; still, compared to when she first arrived, she had made enormous improvement.

Charlotte wasted no time in getting distracted from her work and looked out the window. "Huh, what's that?"

It had not even been three minutes since they'd begun. Exasperated, Yuria snapped, "What now?"

"I think there's a piece of white cloth caught up in the tree out there," Charlotte said. "What is it?"

Her interest piqued, Yuria went over to the window. Then, she jumped in shock. "That's no piece of cloth. That's a child!"

Charlotte and Yuria raced from the hall and towards the foot of the tree. Yuria called, "Who's up there? Don't move! You'll get hurt."

"Okay," came the faltering response. It was Claire. Yuria could not begin to fathom how she had climbed so high. The girl must be drenched to the skin, she thought, as Claire had virtually no protection from the pounding rain. The little girl was always soft-spoken, but today her voice was especially feeble.

As Yuria tried to think of the best way to come to Claire's rescue, Charlotte snapped, "Humph! Fine, you leave me no choice."

She grabbed a branch.

"Wait, what?" Yuria said. "Do you mean to climb the tree? You?"

"Duh! How else are we supposed to get her down?"

Charlotte clambered up into the tree quickly. It was an easy thing to ascend, its branches thick enough for the orphanage's children to play and climb in. Even Charlotte, who was clad in a long habit that made movement difficult, found it easy to reach the place where little Claire huddled.

"Grab onto me, Claire," Charlotte told her.

“O-Okay.”

Then at that very moment, Charlotte’s foot slipped. Both girls cried, “Ah!” Had Charlotte been able to grab onto a branch, there would have been no cause for concern, but her hands were full with little Claire. Thus, both tumbled headlong through the air.

Yuria scrambled to cast a spell. She typically tried to use her magic but seldom so that Charlotte would not see it, but this was such an emergency that she no longer cared. Charlotte and Claire bobbed to a stop a mere whisker above the ground.

“Whoa!” Charlotte cried. “Wait, can you do magic? If you could have done that all along, you should have rescued her sooner!”

“Never you mind about that. We’d better get Claire to the infirmary.”

Yuria decided it would be fastest for her to carry little Claire herself, so she scooped her up from Charlotte’s arms and sprinted to the orphanage.

Charlotte watched them go, a waterlogged piece of pretty stationery left in her hand.



That evening, Charlotte returned to their room after dinner and tentatively asked, “So, how is she?”

“She caught a cold, and she has a fever, from the looks of things. The medicine isn’t working on her.” Yuria paused. “Fortunately, a holy woman with healing magic will be coming to pay us a visit next week, so I’ll ask her to take a look at Claire then.”

“Hmm? A holy woman, huh?”

Holy women around the world lived and worked in their kingdoms’ respective capital cities, which suggested there would be an open portal connection between the abbey and the capital sometime next week. Were she her usual self, Charlotte’s only thought would have been of flight, but today something else occupied her mind.

“Hey, where’s your guys’ portal at?” she asked.

“With your track record of running away and taking asylum in other kingdoms, I most certainly will not tell you,” Yuria said.

“Aw, c’mon. Look, I didn’t do anything wrong.” Charlotte paused before asking, “So, Yuria, you can do magic, right?”

“Only a little bit. Not to the point of being able to operate a portal. Sorry, but you’re not getting out of here, missy.”

“Aww.” Charlotte pouted. She had been obsessed with escaping, day in and day out, but she knew it was hopeless due to the geographic difficulties. However, that wasn’t the whole story now.

Yuria misinterpreted her silence as sulking and threw her a sharp glare. “You’re an odd one, I’ll give you that. Here I thought you were concerned for Claire, but next thing I know, you’re plotting to run away. You’re so quick to jump from one thing to another that you really are a kid.”

“Say what?!” Charlotte demanded. “Yuria, if you can use magic, then that means you must come from the aristocracy too. Right? Tell me who your family is, but I bet you’re nowhere near as high-ranking as I am!”

Yuria fell silent for a moment before saying, “This is the exact reason I didn’t want to tell you. The minute you aristocrats find out I’m descended from noble stock, you all try to use that to your advantage.” She paused again. “I’m no different from Claire. I’ve been here ever since I was a child!”

With that, she snatched up her journal and stormed out of their room, slamming the door behind her.

Charlotte plopped herself down on her bed, startled by that response. “Huh,” she muttered to herself. “I didn’t ask, but okay. What’s her problem? Look, I didn’t do anything wrong, you know?”

As she curled up in the bedsheets, she smoothed out the wrinkles in the pretty paper that Claire had clutched in her first. It had become so sodden that the original pattern was only just barely visible. Charlotte knew Claire would be horribly disappointed to get it back in this state.

Charlotte's older sister, Claire, had sent it for Charlotte to have here in her new life at the abbey. Big Claire was, for some unfathomable reason, convinced that Charlotte only liked cute things, but this made no sense at all to Charlotte. She no longer needed to keep up the act of the darling, plucky little sister, hence why she had deemed the stationery of no importance and given it to Little Claire. Little Claire seemed to treasure it, yet Charlotte had no more paper of its type left in her desk. As much as she would have liked to go into town and buy more for her as a replacement, she had no way of doing so herself at present. If only she could ask someone, at the very least.

"What was she doing wandering around carrying this?" Charlotte grouched. "Of all the stupid things. Ugh."

Several days later, Charlotte received a visitor after prayers. She walked to the designated room on leaden feet to find Prince Gilbert and Pooh awaiting her.

"I do hope you've been well," Gilbert said.

"Yeah, yeah," she grumped. "Look, when are you going to spring me from here already?"

"Hmm. Would, say, a hundred years from now work for you?"

"Har-dee-har. By that point in time, I wouldn't even be the main character anymore."

"Why, surely you must know you're no longer the main character already." He smiled breezily as he offered up one harsh sally after another.

Charlotte puffed up her cheeks, pouting. "Drat! If I'd known this whole time that you're like me and aware that we live in a video game, I would have had other options. I wish you'd told me sooner."

"My goal was lifting Lupty's curse. I wasn't interested in you personally, you know. So what would have been the point?"

"You're not Gilbert's type," Pooh informed her.

"Aww, come on! But I'm the main character! Everyone loves the main character."

“They’ll never let you out of the abbey if you’re still going on about that,” Gilbert said. “I’ll tell the abbess. You know you can be put back in isolation at any time, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry already, okay? Not like I did anything wrong, but whatever!”

Such was par for the course for a conversation between Charlotte and Gilbert. He came to visit her periodically but made a point to never bring her care packages or anything of the sort, which made Charlotte consider his visits as nothing but a horrible bother.

Yet today she had bigger concerns. “Say, could I ask you to do me a favor?” she suggested. “I’d like you to go out and buy something for me.”

“Ah, having a prince be your errand boy,” Gilbert said. “You never change. But at any rate, my answer is a hard no.”

Charlotte said nothing for a minute before snapping, “Okay, fine. Whatever! Not like I care!”

She supposed that gifting Claire new stationery was impossible after all. If it was not in the cards, then so be it, she decided.

Just as she was about to quite easily give up, Gilbert switched topics. “Say, that reminds me. I happened to see just a bit ago a holy woman casting a healing spell on a girl named Claire. So someone with the same name as Miss Claire lives in the orphanage, I suppose?”

Charlotte reacted in alarm. “Well, yeah, I guess so. Wait, does that mean she’s doing better now?”

“I hear she’s right as rain,” Gilbert promised.

“Thank goodne— I mean, uh. Huh, you don’t say.” Charlotte broke off and feigned composure just as she started to show visible relief.

“Oh, and she said the cutest thing,” Gilbert went on. “‘The nice lady gave me paper, but then the wind picked it up and blew it into a tree. So I had to go get it back.’ That was how she got caught in the rain and ended up with a cold.”

Charlotte hesitated for a moment. “Oh. I see.” Her cheeks reddened slightly, and she could not meet Gilbert’s eye.

Gilbert then produced a parcel. “You know, this white magic stuff like you used to have really is something, isn’t it? We don’t have anyone in Lupty with that level of skill.” He hesitated momentarily before continuing. “Be that as it may, I found it moving to watch the holy woman work her arts. It truly is a pity that you’ve lost all your powers. But I suppose you had it coming, really.”

Had Charlotte been her usual self, she would have replied without a moment’s delay, “But I didn’t do anything wrong!” Yet she remembered how warm little Claire’s body had felt in her arms up in that tree and did not speak.

She knew Gilbert was right. Had she her powers, she could have saved Claire without placing the girl in any danger of falling; with her former white magical powers, she could have healed Claire without the bother of waiting for a holy woman. And yet she did not want Gilbert to recognize this, so she scowled in grumpy indignation.

She always acted in such a fashion, but Gilbert paid her not the slightest bit of mind as he opened the parcel and showed her its contents. “Look, this is a gift from Miss Claire Martino. She gave it to me and said that she didn’t want to send you a present that would only be unwanted. She wished to give you an opportunity to choose what you’d like.”

Charlotte gasped. “Oh my!”

The parcel was filled with all kinds of stationery sets, some interwoven with lace and ribbons, others bearing charming artwork, and still others embedded with colorful flowers or gemstones.

Charlotte snarled in the face of her gift, “Oh, that Claire! She’s such a perfect lady. But I don’t even like this kind of stuff! I’d much rather have a handsome prince, a pretty gown, or precious jewels.”

“Should I take it back and tell her you don’t want any of it?”

“N-No way!” She frantically scooped up the stationery. As she did so, she recalled that frock she had desired when she was small. And if the stationery played the role of that long-lost dress, then little Claire would be like Charlotte back when she was too young to do anything but cling to her mother’s skirts.

“Well, goodbye now,” Gilbert said. “Do write Miss Claire a letter; it’d make

her ever so happy. I would imagine that the purpose of her asking me to bring you all these stationery sets is that she'd like you to use one to send her a reply."

Charlotte giggled. "La, la, la, not listening. Now, spring me out of here the next time you visit!"

"Not even remotely an option."

"Aww!"

Gilbert left the visitor's room as they carried on their usual repartee.

Then, Charlotte took a cautious look around her before nervously glancing at the paper in her arms. She set off for the main hall, where Yuria had undoubtedly started on the cleaning before her.

There was an unusual spring in her step. Of course, she detested cleaning. Yet Charlotte stood on the cusp of understanding that her world was real and coming into an awareness of other people's feelings.



That evening, Yuria wrote in her journal:

Charlotte Martino has been with us for three months, and she came to talk with me today. She told me that she was not actually born into the Martino household, and then she apologized for her rude language the other day. This was the first time I've ever seen her keep quiet about her own blamelessness (although she certainly implied that). She then asked me to give a stationery set to Claire in the orphanage (although she is perfectly capable of doing it herself).

She still does nothing but gripe, yet in her own way, I think she is starting to come to terms with the gravity of her crimes. She has a long way to go, but I'm going to do my duty as her chaperone and keep a good eye on her as she makes a new start.

When she finished writing, she looked over at the contented expression on her snoring roommate's face. A slight smile played across Yuria's lips.

Extra Story: Vik Grows Wroth

The evening after Vik decided to go and bring Claire home from Lupty found both him and a deeply uncomfortable Keith inside his barely lit bedroom. The news Keith had brought visibly rankled Vik.

“A hunting tournament?” he repeated. “You are certain?”

“Yes, see here. We’ve just had a letter from the King of Lupty, sent to us in absolute secrecy. He writes that they are rapidly throwing together a hunting tournament to be held upon the morrow.”

Vik took the letter and confirmed that its contents were identical to Keith’s report. He clenched it in his fist, unable to contain his irritation.

“But why?” he asked. “I thought we sent Claire as my official fiancée. Did we not?”

“Yes, and therein lies the mystery.” Keith paused. “According to the letter, Prince Gilbert has been acting mad. Vik, what are we to do?”

Vik did not answer. *“What are we to do?” Well now, that’s the question, isn’t it?* he thought. He, as a matter of course, knew the significance behind the Luptian Crown hosting such a tournament. Thus, it left him with but one response.

He stood and rang the bell on his desk, which called for the chamberlain who attended to Vik’s daily needs. “I know we were to set out tomorrow, but there’s been a change of plan,” Vik said. “We leave this instant. Keith, prepare to depart immediately.”

“As you command,” Keith said. He hesitated momentarily and then continued, “But are you serious? It’s the middle of the night, for heaven’s sake.”

“What difference does that make? Keith, inform His Majesty and tell Denis to write back to Lui.”

As he gave orders, Vik did not wait for the chamberlain and fetched his riding

outfit from the closet himself. He typically rode in townwear, and as such, he had almost never worn a formal riding outfit before.

This puzzled Keith, who was cognizant of such a fact. “What’re you bringing those clothes out for?” he asked. “Are we making this a formal visit?”

“The letter spoke of a hunting tournament tomorrow, did it not? If they plan to treat Claire as their goddess, then I too will not beat around the bush. I’ll charge right in and make her mine once more.” He spoke so easily, as if it were only a matter of course for him, while he began to change.

Keith, who had been panicking only moments before, whistled in admiration. “So you’re joining the tournament too? Look at you, growing up and finally acting like a prince.”

“We don’t have the time for cockamamie jokes. Get ready now; we leave at once.”

Vik banged the closet doors shut, aware of his older friend chuckling quietly behind him.

He soon departed from the palace a day ahead of schedule, too impatient to wait another moment. This meant, naturally, that by the time he used the portal and arrived in the border town of Riccase, it was the dead of night. The church priest overseeing the portal was quite taken by surprise when he learned of this expedited trip.

“Your Highness,” he said, “I’m afraid you cannot take the portal into Lupty at this hour. Think of the danger on the roads. I beg you, please wait until morning at least.”

Although the priest—a man significantly older than Vik’s own royal father—attempted to placate him into agreement with a smile, Vik noticed how concerned the man looked.

Denis pacified their host with his own affable smile. “Father priest, I’m sure the prince will be fine. We’re with him, after all. Besides, His Highness is on his way to bring his dear fiancée home. Why, far as I see it, he misses her so much he won’t wait a minute more to see her.” Denis paused. “You could try and stop

him, but we wouldn't want him stealing away on his own instead, now would we?"

The priest sighed in understanding. "Very well. I see that this is a special situation, and I will not bar your way. However, I've heard curious talk from Lupty these days. Please take whatever care you can on the road."

Vik raised an eyebrow. "Curious talk of what?"

"There are accounts of fiend sightings," the bishop said. "We have proper barriers on the Paffish side, so none have been seen here in Paffuto as of yet, but I cannot say the same for Lupty. Even worse, I fear the beast is a ferocious Black Shuck."

The prince's party fell silent. Keith and Denis felt the palpable tension in the air, yet Vik grinned impishly. "Thanks for the information. We'll make sure to be careful. Yet...I daresay catching a Black Shuck would allow any man to win a hunting tournament."

Keith sounded at his wits' end as he groaned, "Vik, please don't do anything that dangerous. You're shaving years off my life span here."

Ultimately, his sorrow became the backdrop before which Vik, Denis, and Keith left Riccase.

The interior of the coach was dark in the dead of night. The lights had been dimmed to allow its occupants the chance of at least some rest as they raced at atypically fast speeds, but this had the opposite effect on Vik. Whenever he closed his eyes, all he could think of was Claire's worried face.

I should never have let her go off on her own, he thought. Our allies they may be, but there was something undeniably strange about him stipulating she come alone. He simmered with rage, his hands squeezed so tight in his lap he could not clench them any harder. Claire has the magical ability to change the world, but I'm sure she'll take the diplomatic relations between our two kingdoms into consideration and stop herself at only casting wards. Will that be enough, though? Well, she has Lui with her. I doubt anything bad will happen.

He mentally replayed the moment before her departure when they had

pressed their foreheads together and talked about their future in her detached palace apartment. Claire had smiled at him so gently when he'd expressed his discontent for and concern over sending her off alone. The calm, quiet light in her eyes had conveyed such strength of will, and the mere memory of it made Vik more emotional than he could bear. *I wish I hadn't let her go*, he thought. *I wish she were still here in my arms.*

Just then, the cart and its sentimental passenger ground to a halt. It must have been time to change the horses, Vik figured.

Shortly thereafter, Denis popped in. "News for you, Vik. We got another letter from Lui a moment ago, and she says she's going to join the hunting tournament too."

That gave Vik pause. "Lui? Hunting?" He hadn't expected that bit of news. Simultaneously, his face stiffened as he imagined all too easily how this might turn out. From the looks of it, Denis shared the same thought.

"Lui's old man, the Earl Clark, hunts, doesn't he? Lui must be pretty good at it herself, I bet. Heck, with her magic too, she's got this tournament in the bag. What I wouldn't give to watch!" Denis paused. "I guess this means we don't have to be in such a rush to pick up Claire, huh?"

"...Maybe," Vik admitted. Now that he thought about it, this seemed like just the sort of thing Lui would come up with. Besides, chances were she could resolve the whole issue without causing any ill feelings on the Luptian side.

Vik's tension drained away, and all at once he felt exhausted. Yet for all his relief, Vik had mixed feelings about the development.

"I'll still go," he said. "Lui and I can both be in the tournament. I won't let her show me up."

"Huh?" Denis said. "Come on, it's better if you don't. Keith's practically going bald from stress, so just let Lui handle it."

"I can't. Claire's my fiancée. I'm not going to let Lui make off with her." Vik found himself unintentionally pouting.

Denis grinned, entirely unconcerned. "Ooh, really now? Well, I'd say you have nothing to worry about, but then I'd be a liar. Sorry, pal. Claire and Lui have

some pretty good chemistry, you know what I'm saying? And when Lui's all kitted out in her knight uniform, the two of them look like a perfect couple."

That struck such a chord with Vik, and once again he felt anxious to be on his way, albeit in a much different sense than before.

But as he was now a bit calmer than he'd been earlier, Vik fired a retort back at his grinning retainer. "Are you sure that doesn't bother you, Denis? I'll have you know that Lui likes me best...in a professional sense, that is." The last of which he tacked on in an undertone.

However, although Denis and Lui were especially close, Denis responded to the question with a much more mature smile than was typical for him. "Hm? Oh, that's what she says on paper, but you and I both know Claire's the true apple of her eye."

Vik stiffened at that perfect comeback.

"Anyway, I figure they'll be done changing the horses any minute now," Denis said. "Ready to hit the road, my prince?"

"Yes," said Vik. "Anyway, I will be in that tournament, so you let Keith know."

The coach slowly set off, picking up speed as it trundled towards its destination.

Vik realized then that the worry and impatience occupying him earlier had vanished, although he could not have said when it happened. He gazed into the darkness outside his window and whispered sincerely, "Claire, I miss you. I can't wait to see you again soon."

Afterword

Hello, my name is Saki Ichibu. Thank you for reading *Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke: Volume 4*. I know it's been a bit of time since we last met, but I am very happy to see you once again!

FFDD has made it all the way to four volumes, and I am nothing but grateful towards all the people who have given me their constant support. Thank you very much.

I learned recently that quite a few people start at the afterword before going back and reading the rest of the book. Therefore, I will try not to talk about too many of the things that happen in this story.

In volume four, we see the introduction of Gilbert, the prince of a neighboring kingdom. He is handsome but a bit of a disappointment otherwise, which makes him the kind of character I adore. The way Nemusuke drew him makes him look very cool!

The artwork for the cover was so exactly like what I had in mind that I pressed my hands together in gratitude when I saw it. I'm so grateful that you drew this, and thank you so very much, Nemusuke. (There go my hands again.)

Anyway, Claire and Vik's relationship has grown even stronger in this volume. It was enormous fun to write their sweet, delightful relationship, yet as their author, I kept finding myself thinking, "I wish they could hurry and grow up so I can write even more episodes about the happy couple." I hope you will keep following them and their future adventures.

Lastly, I would like to give thanks to everyone who assisted with this book. Let me start by giving a big thank you to Nemusuke for these gorgeous illustrations, to Ushio Shirotori for the manga adaptation, and to my editor. Likewise, thank you to everyone else who has given me their constant support.

Also, my editor was kind enough to include an advertisement for my upcoming work *Muno Saijo ha Akujo ni Naritai Gimo no Magawari de Totsuida Reijo, Koshaku-sama no Dekiai ni Kidzukanai* (*This Useless Genius Wants to Be Wicked: I Stepped In to Marry My Stepsister's Fiancé but Was Oblivious to the Duke's Infatuation with Me*) (released by Dengeki no Shin Bungei) on the sash of the Japanese copy of this volume. Thank you very much for that.

Nothing would make me happier than to think that I was able to give you even just a few moments of entertainment while reading this book. I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Saki Ichibu



Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke

"Are you nervous, Claire?" Vik asked.

"Yes, but of course I am," she said.

Vik's voice did not betray so much as a modicum of tension, in direct opposition to the way Claire felt, even as she tried to smile elegantly. Her apprehension was only to be expected. Today marked the day of Claire and Vik's engagement ceremony.

Claire Martino

(Our Leading Lady)

16 years old

A descendant of the Martino family, which is renowned in Noston for producing girls of marvelous talent. She visits Lupty upon an invitation from Gilbert.

Lui Clark

18 years old

The future Duchess Clark. A knight and member of Vik's guard, she's as suave as any man. Also Claire's escort on their present adventure.

Gilbert Héctor Lagrange

18 years old

The second eldest Prince of Lupty. Oddly preoccupied with Claire.



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Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke: Volume 4

by Ichibu Saki

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